

Declaration

I declare that I have written this thesis myself and that it is the result of my own work.

Decorum and the rural poor
in English and Scots poetry,
1770-1812

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Writing a doctoral thesis, it is well known, is a group activity but responsibility for the finished product unfortunately rests with one individual. If I admit that the faults of my own thesis derive exclusively from my stubborn recalcitrance, perhaps the following people will not feel awkward about being associated with the writing of it.

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Abstract

This study depends on the premise that rural poetry in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries provides more reliable evidence of contemporary assumptions about poetry than of contemporary knowledge of the rural poor. According to the concept of neoclassical decorum, poetry was expected to achieve a balance between the probable and the morally admirable. As the ideals of poetry's major audience became more urban and middle-class (if the reviewers may be taken as representative), what was regarded as probable by the poet and recognized as admirable by the reader began to diverge. Consequently the poet's role, as dramatized in his poetry by his persona, began to change, from commentator to mediator to seeker after uncertain values. Early nineteenth-century reviewers tended to interpret poetry in such a way as to confirm their sense of the centrality of the urban middle classes. They would approve poetry which presented their milieu as the repository of values, the pivot of consensus, and were less responsive to poetry which defined their interests as peripheral, requiring mediation with other sets of values. Decorum began to be interpreted as a harmony not of social relations but of more private and less holistic moral values.

Correspondingly it became less common for poetry to refer, by means of abstractions (the 'poetic diction' rejected by Wordsworth), to the implicit context of consensual beliefs provided by decorum. The increasing emphasis on sentiment and particularity of description in poetry suggests a weakening of decorum. It indicates a growing effort to determine the response of the reader by means of a context created by the individual poem alone. Moreover, the experimental techniques of the major poets discussed in this study point to a dissatisfaction with conventional notions of decorum. Their experiments stemmed, in part, from their concern with the rural poor and their consequent detachment from the increasingly assertive urban literary milieu. Goldsmith, for instance, attempted to amalgamate the older kind of poetry of social relations with the newer kind of poetry of individual sensibility in order to advocate a social order based on values which were less mercantile and more familial. Crabbe emphasized the irregularity and discord of contemporary society in order to expose the unreality of the ideals of harmony and uniformity basic to decorum. Similarly Cowper concentrated on apparently insignificant details in order to challenge accepted proprieties. Burns made use of the ironic and dramatic qualities of the Scots vernacular tradition to present a moral and social relativity which threatened the hierarchical assumptions of his readers. Wordsworth's poetry embodies the most thoroughgoing rejection of the implicit contract of decorum connecting the proprieties of the poem with social proprieties; he attempted to recreate a consensus on the basis of unmediated individual experience. Although the risk of isolating idiosyncrasies led to compromises in the work of all of these poets, it was their common effort to forge a new consensus between poet and reader (rather than the celebration of the individual sensibility more commonly associated with Romanticism) which enabled them to escape the divisions which rend the poetry of Clare.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Let them cant about DECORUM
Who have character to lose.
(Burns, 'The Jolly Beggars', 272-273)

To some readers, bored with those old chestnuts, 'literature and society', 'tradition and individual talent', this essay will undoubtedly seem to make a great deal of complicated and exhausting fuss about very little. There may, however, be antiquarians left who believe that literature has a cognitive effect which is not strictly limited to its historical context, a moral importance greater than that of demonstrating its own impotence and a social texture which cannot always be reduced to mechanical and discarded conventions. I intend to 'cant about decorum', in defiance of Burns's warning, in the hope that literature (and therefore the literary critic) does have 'character to lose', even while accepting Burns's implication that 'character' is a social construct and not the manifestation of an immanent quality.

Even if it is true that our perceptions of both literature and society are determined by language games, according to rules which are largely a matter of historical accident or design, perhaps it does not follow that all rules are equally binding or trivial simply because they may not be based on any absolute truth. Nor is it clear why an acknowledgement of such ontological groundlessness should be valued in a literary work more than something else. I would be less tentative if my own research had not impressed on me how often the most deeply held principles have eventually become conventions and finally curiosities. However, even if the conventionality of all thought is the inevitable consequence of the arbitrariness of all language, perhaps it is still possible to be more or less conventional. The fact that at any time there are competing conventions, as eighteenth-century poets discovered when faced with antagonistic cultures, rural and urban, may give us some

room for manoeuvre.¹ Literary history, itself a set of competing conventions, may contribute to an exploration of the resulting contradictions. There may well be no possibility of knowing whether such explorations are historically accurate or even what historical accuracy might be (other than the consensus of historians) but literary critics are concerned not only with certainty but also with the more modest problem of how to live. Perhaps it is only nostalgia for a lost authority and a distaste for being conventional that has led some to feel that the only alternative to certainty is repeatedly to demonstrate our uncertainty.² Perhaps the attention currently being paid to the groundlessness of literary meaning is another consequence of

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1. I may seem to be adopting here a concept similar to that of 'relative autonomy', an oxymoron popular among French Marxists such as Althusser, Poulantzas and Bourdieu, but this concept, I believe, merely postpones the resolution of the logical paradox of the first cause or ultimate determinant, whether it be designated the economy, the word, or God. I prefer simply to acknowledge that we are able to recognize different conventions without inquiring how such recognition happens, for if we make such an inquiry in epistemological terms, we are involved in an infinite regression (is our recognition governed by a prior convention or are we free to choose? is our basis for choosing between *these* alternatives necessarily convention or not?). In other words, 'how such recognition happens' is likely to be a matter of personal history, for which no universally valid explanation is available. As far as my own history is concerned, I was helped in reaching this conclusion by Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton, 1980).
 2. An apparently objective and impregnable authority is thus displaced and reconstituted as an apparently unassailable irony, as David Simpson points out when he defines an 'ironist' as 'a persona whose exact status in himself is indeterminable, and therefore unassailable' (David Simpson, *Irony and Authority in Romantic Poetry* (London, 1979), p. 22). See the following aphorism by Nietzsche -
 Control over the world by means of positive action: first through science, as the destroyer of illusion, then through art, as the only remaining mode of existence, because it cannot be dissolved by logic.
 (Quoted in Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke, and Proust* (New Haven, 1979), p. 86). It must be added, however, that de Man, the most uncompromising deconstructionist amongst literary critics, resists the temptation to claim 'negative certainty' for himself, though it is significant that he recognizes the temptation (see de Man, pp. 16-19).

literary criticism's traditional competition with science. It may be a recoil into definite uncertainty from the structuralist attempt to define a science of reading by which critical judgments might be tested with definite certainty (an attempt which depended on an outmoded notion of science as an epistemologically privileged discipline). Both Pope and Wordsworth, I shall argue, came to believe that such oscillations between certainty and uncertainty, the absolute and the relative, were essential to a peculiarly human continuity which was neither the unchanging eternity of God nor the permanent recurrence of inanimate nature.

In order to introduce my more or less conventional concern for literature as a reminder of various ways of living, it is probably best to begin with a passage from Trollope's *The Way We Live Now*. If my own discourse seems as decadent as that of Trollope's characters, I hope that it may be treated with Trollope's indulgence.

'I like Suffolk. The people are hearty, and radicalism is not quite so rampant as it is elsewhere. The poor people touch their hats, and the rich people think of the poor. There is something left among us of the old English habits.'

'That is so nice', said Lady Carbury.

'Something left of old English ignorance', said the bishop.

'All the same I dare say we're improving, like the rest of the world. What beautiful flowers you have here, Mr Carbury! At any rate, we can grow flowers in Suffolk.'³

The tone is casual and the irony affectionate. If we are meant to acknowledge the ignorance in Lady Carbury's aesthetic appreciation of social relations in Suffolk, our indignation is muted by a sense of the characters' isolation and helplessness and by a recognition of the real loss which they are resigned to accept. Their social function, a paternalist discipline, is being rendered obsolete by an emphasis on progress which has perhaps exceeded its purpose. They survive in a rural enclave which is beautiful but threatened. This, at least, is the response that Trollope, I believe, intended; we resist it only by resisting his artistic manipulation. No doubt if the passage were to occur in a modern novel the tone would seem provocative and the irony heavy-handed, for that is certainly not the way we live now and such a conversation would be merely affected aping of a past age. By such considerations, by a complex amalgamation of perspectives, dramatic, social and historical, our reading of a passage of literature is determined. Trollope's irony, while defining characters within a network of individual relationships, places a social attitude within an

3. Anthony Trollope, *The Way We Live Now*, edited by Robert Tracy (New York, 1974), pp. 132-133.

historical context - the traditional relationship between rich and poor, a reciprocity of benevolence and deference, has become habitual, a mechanical drama with a forgotten plot. It is an irony, moreover, from which the tradition itself is not immune. The characterization, 'the poor people', 'the rich people', less usual than the more categorical division, 'the rich' and 'the poor', hints at an arbitrariness in the strict separation of roles; the designation 'English' suggests provinciality. Trollope's irony also implies an attitude to the social function and status of literature. It indicates some degree of confidence in his readers; at least, it depends on the existence of readers who would not regard the conversation as simply true or false. A more didactic tone would suggest a different relationship between author and reader and a different attitude to the function of literature.

It is the concept of decorum that encompasses these intricate relationships between author and reader, literature and society. In examining the ways in which the rural poor were presented in a period earlier than that of Trollope's novel and in poetry, in which controlling expectations of attitude and style operated more strongly than in the relatively new medium of the novel, I have tried to come to an understanding of the assumptions shaping literary culture as Britain was transformed from an agricultural into an industrial nation. What changes in attitude occurred between Pope's triumphant prediction of the disappearance of Timon's villa beneath a field of corn and the merely wistful tone in which Trollope looks forward to the further urbanization of the countryside?

Ideas of literary and social decorum tend to merge and attitudes to literature and to society work upon each other. As regards the manner in which the rural poor were conceived in poetry in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, it has generally been thought that this reciprocal process involved a broadening of the subject-matter regarded as suitable for poetry. While it is true that poetry in the period 1770 to 1812 was concerned with a wider and more detailed cross-section of society than earlier in the eighteenth century, it might perhaps be more accurate to characterize this trend as a weakening of decorum. Once the elegant fictions of Arcadian

pastoral had given place to a dissatisfaction with classical models, poets writing about the country sought to base on the contemporary rural poor an original style of literary representation that would satisfy the developing taste for observed detail and at the same time be acceptable to a cultivated but increasingly amorphous audience as ideal, that is, as both probable and morally admirable. In response to various cultural and social pressures the conventions of classical pastoral were recast so as to embody ideals of native simplicity, sturdy independence, pious industry. Poets, however, in the attempt to be at once true to their subjects and pleasing to their readers, began to feel as though they were straddling opposing cultures and their ideal characterizations became less the general types of an observed reality than didactic models designed to effect a reconciliation. Confronting an audience whose interests became more assertively urban and middle-class, they were led to question preconceived ideas of social unity and progress and to examine their own positions within society. Their self-image, conveyed by the poetry, underwent a series of transformations, from commentator to mediator to seeker after uncertain values. The social context embodying their poetic ideals began to shrink, from the country to the family to the isolated individual confronting other individuals or an impersonal nature.⁴ Perceived analogies between the moral and the aesthetic, the literary and the social, became less obvious as the century progressed; moral virtues began to be defined in terms of prudence,

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4. Similar developments have been noted in the novel, in attitudes to the family and in moral philosophy. Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (London, 1957) detects in the eighteenth-century novel a change in emphasis from the objective, social and public to the subjective, individualist and private. Lawrence Stone in *The Family, Sex and Marriage in England 1500-1800* (London, 1977) has documented a general tendency in the middle and upper sectors of society from patriarchy to what he describes as affective individualism, extending over the period 1640 to 1800. Randolph Trumbach in *The Rise of the Egalitarian Family* (New York, 1978) similarly argues for a change from patriarchy to domesticity based on a more egalitarian ideal in the aristocratic family of eighteenth-century England. Alasdair MacIntyre in *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (London, 1981) traces the collapse of the Aristotelian notion of virtue, which defined the individual as part of a community, and its replacement by the idea of the autonomous moral subject.

restraint and regularity instead of elegance and good breeding. The relaxation of these analogies allowed a proliferation of literary styles. The new moral code was challenged not so much by the extremity of the sublime, the irregularity of the picturesque or the inelegance of the familiar as by poetry which insisted on other moral possibilities.

Explanations of these developments in terms of increasing social disorder or loss of belief in the existing order⁵ have some truth but I am not certain of their adequacy. The dominance of satire in the early eighteenth century suggests a social dissatisfaction which, while different in kind from that of the later period, was not perhaps so very different in degree. Moreover, pastoral incorporated social dissonance between city and country in its conventions. In any case, arguments about decorum in the earlier period were, with respect to pastoral, arguments concerning how much to exclude. The social order embodied in eighteenth-century poetry, whether as an existing reality or as an attainable ideal, was always fragile. In Pope's *Essay on Man*, for example, society is threatened by the constant folly of men; Thomson's idea of universal harmony is imposed upon what is demonstrably intractable material. As poetry became more inclusive in its attention to the rural poor, aesthetic unity seemed more difficult to attain. It is not easy to determine whether this is a reflection of disorder which is increasing or disorder which is increasingly unmanageable.

The growing uncertainty in poetry which contributed to the weakening of decorum reflected, in part, a loss of faith in the reader. The history of criticism in the popular magazines of this period may be characterized as, to use a currently fashionable phrase, a

5. See for example, R.A. Foakes, *The Romantic Assertion* (London, 1958), pp. 39-50.

history of 'misreading'⁶ according to the moral and social predispositions of an increasingly vocal literary culture which served to emasculate the challenges levelled by major poets at its dominance and which survived well into the 1820s.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century Ambrose Philips identified a new audience for poetry, the 'middling gentry of a liberal education', an urban elite which, according to Tom Woodman, defined itself by means of an ideal of politeness.⁷ The major audience for poetry at the beginning of the nineteenth century were similarly urban and 'middling' but did not often advertize themselves as gentry; they were less emphatic about the importance of a liberal education and were

6. By 'misreading' I mean only that what seems significant to me in the poetry is consistently ignored by the majority of reviewers. I would avoid the charge of anachronism which this definition might raise by suggesting that the significances which I discuss are not exclusively mine (or the twentieth-century reader's) because they seem to be shared by some of the poets and a minority of the reviewers with whom I am concerned. I cannot ultimately be certain of this, of course, because I cannot step outside the 'hermeneutic circle'; my conception of the period is determined by reading texts according to my conception of the period. But then such certainty is not available to anyone. Other readers similarly will be aware of 'misreadings' of my own but not of their own 'misreadings'. This distinction between writer and reader is simply another way of suggesting that reading in general, like literary history in particular, is concerned with competing conventions and the contradictions between them, Wordsworthian irregularities which enable us to move between one set of conventions (the reader's, for example) and another (the writer's), if not outside convention altogether (see chapter seven and compare Stanley Fish, *Is There a Text in this Class?: The Authority of Interpretive Communities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), pp. 197-200). This formulation seems to me preferable to Harold Bloom's, which tends to limit interpretation, in structuralist fashion, to binary forms - 'reading / misreading', 'weak / strong', 'determinate / indeterminate', 'certainty / uncertainty' - within a context of perhaps reductively polemical antagonism. Nevertheless, I have used the term 'misreading' because it is now a familiar word in the critical vocabulary for the kind of interested ('repressed') reading to which I am referring, though I have added this note in the hope of limiting the 'misreading' of at least this point.

7. Tom Woodman, 'Pope and the Polite', *Essays in Criticism*, 28 (1978), 19-37. See also *The Eighteenth Century*, edited by Pat Rogers (London, 1978), p. 16.

united in rejecting politeness as an ideal. The differences were small perhaps but decisive.

The literary representations of the rural poor provided a means of self-definition for these predominantly middle-class readers, Whigs and Tories alike. The poetry which was approved tended to distinguish the middle classes from the dissolute gentry, emphasize their centrality by demonstrating the universality of their moral code, assuage their social consciences by linking contentment with self-reliance, confirm their sense of social superiority by identifying ambition in the poor with discontent and envy. The typical middle-class reader occupied a consciously intermediate position, sympathizing with the virtuous poor against the dissipated rich, identifying with the respectable rich against the depraved poor. The poetry which was found disturbing and misread tended to be the poetry which challenged the justice of that selectivity by implying, for example, that social divisions were determined less by morality than by economic power, that certain moral standards were not universally applicable and hence were not an alternative determinant of hierarchy, that social considerations were irrelevant to questions of morality.

Even poetry ostensibly addressed to the poor worked to confirm the self-image of the middle-class reader as society's moral arbiter. Just as episcopal sermons exhorting the poor to be content with their lot were rarely heard by the poor but were, in fact, a means of reassuring privileged congregations,⁸ so the poetry of moral exhortation was not really a literary equivalent of the ubiquitous religious tracts. The latter, even if they were more often read by the higher than the lower classes,⁹ were intended to rival in popularity the radical pamphlet and the lascivious broadside and were therefore tailored in style and argument to accord with the writer's preconceptions

8. R.A. Soloway, *Prelates and People: Ecclesiastical Social Thought in England 1783-1852* (London, 1969), p. 72.

9. R.K. Webb, *The British Working Class Reader 1790-1848* (London, 1955) p. 25-28.

of the poor.¹⁰ Simplifications of poetic style, on the other hand, had more complicated causes. In any case, attempts to create a wider audience for poetry, whether by means of cheap editions or through the circulating libraries, were half-hearted before the 1820s. It was because poetic exhortations to the poor were meant to guide the higher classes in the direction of their benevolence rather than to rouse the lower classes to self-examination that Crabbe felt able to juxtapose them with criticism of Methodist preachers for encouraging the poor to think for themselves.

Just as the critic tended to define the middle classes variously so as to include or exclude the gentry according to whether he had been emphasizing their authority or their iniquity, so the generic term 'the poor' was used to cover a wide and fluctuating range, often for similarly contingent reasons. For example, Patrick Colquhoun, wishing to remove the stigma of poverty and thus quell discontent, defined poverty in 1806 as 'the state of every one who must labour for subsistence'.¹¹ Literary studies such as this one are not amenable to rigorous sociological definitions. Because my aim has been to chart the changes in contemporary attitudes rather than to evaluate them with reference to the actual conditions of the poor, I have not found it necessary to oppose a definition of my own to contemporary definitions, though I have concentrated on attitudes to the rural rather than the urban poor because they seemed to me to expose most sharply the assumptions of what was predominantly an urban literary culture. Similarly it is because the major poets offered the greatest challenge

10. Mrs Boscawen testified to this difference between episcopal and evangelical styles when she congratulated Hannah More on her tract, *Village Politics*. By Will Chip -

Last night a gentleman gave me 'Reasons for Contentment', by Archdeacon Paley, addressed to the labouring part of the British public. I cast my eyes over it, and though I honour Archdeacon Paley, yet I assured the giver that I would send him the production of one, the minute I got home, who understood the language much better: and accordingly I despatched a little packet of Will Chip, before I sat down at home.

(William Roberts, *Memoirs of the Life and Correspondence of Hannah More*, second edition, 4 vols (London, 1834), II, p. 351).

11. P. Colquhoun, *A Treatise on Indigence* (London, 1806), p. 7.

that I have attended to them rather than to the more representative minor poetry and in particular to those of their poems that received most critical notice. By devoting a separate chapter to each of them I have endeavoured to prevent their individuality being submerged in a general thesis.

To determine the extent of a cultural homogeneity which existed in attitude perhaps more than in class I have generally relied on recorded comment rather than the indicators of poetry's mute audience such as publication figures and subscription lists. To the extent that the reviews, which were the most common form of literary criticism, were not broadly representative of a wider readership my conclusions are limited. Nevertheless, for those readers who could afford to buy editions of poetry and whom poets therefore could not afford to ignore the reviewers acted as arbiters of taste. Even those poets most opposed to the reviews, such as Wordsworth, revealed their interest simply by the frequency with which they expressed their hostility. Crabbe, on the other hand, launched his career by addressing a poem to the *Monthly Review*.

All literary historians in this field owe a large debt to Raymond Williams's justly acclaimed book, *The Country and the City*,¹² a debt acknowledged by subsequent investigations of rural literature which also concentrate on the discrepancy between literature and history.¹³ Although these studies adopt Williams's general approach, however, they do not do so uncritically. Richard Feingold, for instance, argues that Williams's 'view of pastoral is of a literary form that worked to mystify [the] actual countryside into an idealized and lyricized evasion of the harsh actualities of production and exploitation' and suggests

12. Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (London, 1973).

13. *The Penguin Book of English Pastoral Verse*, edited by John Barrell and John Bull (London, 1974); Richard Feingold, *Nature and Society: Later Eighteenth-Century Uses of the Pastoral and Georgic* (Hassocks, 1978); James Turner, *The Politics of Landscape: Rural Scenery and Society in English Poetry 1630-1660* (Oxford, 1979); John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840* (Cambridge, 1980).

that 'mystification' is a dangerous category of literary judgment.¹⁴ It is true that it is sometimes unclear whether Williams is criticizing modern nostalgic misreading of literature or the literature itself. To criticize seventeenth- or eighteenth-century literature for misrepresenting contemporary social conditions, as Williams sometimes seems to do, is to apply a critical standard which the literature was never designed to meet. As James Turner points out, it was expected to evince 'sufficient realism to be convincing, and sufficient idealization to be dissociated from immediate reality'.¹⁵ Literature's effect as mystification depends on what sense it is read as a record. Moreover, John Barrell suggests that Williams's notion of the 'real history' which serves to expose the idealizations of literature is reductive. Williams, he argues, defines 'real history' as 'what really happened, in the agrarian history of England, when we have stripped away the nostalgia and mythologising about Merry England or the organic community' but, as Barrell says, 'the myths really happened as well'.¹⁶

These criticisms, of course, do not detract from Williams's central insight that, in his own words, 'the very process of restoring produced literature to its conditions of production reveals that conventions have social roots, that they are not simply formal devices of writing'.¹⁷ While his own concepts of literature and reality are open to objection, this has not prevented others from adopting his method of exposing the 'social roots' of literary conventions by comparing the literature with an extrinsic social reality and thus revealing its tendentiousness. I have myself followed Williams in presenting contradictions in poetry as compromises between a poet's individuality and the pressures of ideological constraints. I have been more hesitant, however, in attributing priority to the poet's social milieu over the requirements of poetic tradition as the dominant constraint. It is true that literary constraints, such as the concept of decorum, had

14. Feingold, p. 10.

15. Turner, p. xiii.

16. *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 164.

17. Raymond Williams, *Politics and Letters* (London, 1979), p. 306.

social causes, connotations and perhaps even consequences but these, I shall argue, tended to involve large notions of social order and morality, of which attitudes to the poor were only one aspect rather than the major determinant. To the changing conditions of the poor and the changing interests of the rich I would add a third cause of structural change in poetry, the changing conception of poetry itself. In this respect I am perhaps closest to Richard Feingold, who argues that poets failed to treat industrialization adequately because they were dependent on basically agrarian genres, pastoral and georgic. Although I think that Feingold underestimates the flexibility of these genres in the eighteenth century, his approach provides a valuable counterbalance to those methodologies which merge literature too easily with a larger ideology or compare it with an extrinsic reality assumed to be both distinct and discoverable. As M.H. Abrams has demonstrated, post-Renaissance criticism was 'primarily oriented, not from work to universe, but from work to audience'.¹⁸ Literature was regarded, for the purposes of evaluation, as a discrete entity, with its own rules for pleasing and instructing the reader.

For these reasons I have attempted to compare poetry concerned with the rural poor not with the actual conditions of the poor but with the concepts of poetic decorum held by the readers to whom the poetry was addressed. Different methodologies produce, not surprisingly, different results. Raymond Williams, for instance, argues that eighteenth-century literature is characterized by a 'transition from reflection to retrospect'¹⁹ - 'the idealisation of the happy tenant, and of the rural retreat, gave way to a deep and melancholy consciousness of change and loss'.²⁰ The transition, he suggests, took place about the middle of the century. However, Williams's characterization excludes poems of retrospect such as Ramsay's *The Gentle Shepherd*, written between 1724 and 1725; even Pope's pastorals look back to a time 'when

18. M.H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York, 1953), p. 14.

19. *The Country and the City*, p. 72.

20. *Ibid.*, p. 61

the best of men follow'd the employment'.²¹ Moreover, it does not account for Feingold's alternative transition, from the satire of Pope to the celebration of Dyer. 'Reflection' and 'retrospect' were probably alternative rather than successive versions of eighteenth-century pastoral; as Williams himself has pointed out, nostalgia for a lost rural England has always been part of the literary tradition.

John Barrell, who discovers analogies between eighteenth-century poetry and painting, offers, it seems to me, a more inclusive characterization - in the first part of the century the rural poor were presented as the base of a harmonious hierarchy; towards the end of the century it became more important to present them as self-reliant and industrious than as part of a unified whole; in the Romantic period the poor once again became part of a harmony, though because there was at that time less widespread confidence in social unity, Romantic harmony was regarded as natural rather than social. The problem with Barrell's characterization, as he himself intimates,²² is that, like Williams's, it can be interpreted as an alternation of versions of pastoral.

It is possible, I think, to discover a trend in poetry between the publication of *The Deserted Village* in 1770 and *Tales* in 1812 which confirms our instinctive impression that a major and decisive change occurred in eighteenth-century literature. The aspect of that change to which I have devoted most attention is the weakening of the concept of a poetry of social relations, in which the poet referred to an ideal social order against which contemporary social practices could be judged and encouraged readers to fulfil their proper responsibilities.

The concept of decorum, with its network of analogies between literature and society, provided a contextual ideal of literary and social order to which poetry was expected to refer. Even early eighteenth-century pastoral, in which there was no pretence of an exact imitation of contemporary life, was a reminder that elegance divorced from responsibility was possible only in a world of fantasy. The notoriously unoriginal abstractions in the poetry of this period

21. *Alexander Pope: Pastoral Poetry and 'An Essay on Criticism'*, edited by E. Audra and Aubrey Williams (London, 1961), p. 25.

22. *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 15-16.

reflect a belief both in literary continuity and in the social cohesiveness of the literary audience; poetry was not intended to create its own terms of reference so much as to maintain decorum's conglomeration of beliefs, a conglomeration which furnished the standards for guiding and evaluating literature and social behaviour generally.

The increasingly particular and emotive descriptions of the rural poor in poetry between 1770 and 1812 point to a weakening of decorum because they indicate a greater emphasis on determining the response of the reader without reference to this wider context. Wordsworth's 'Michael', for instance, though it attempted an accurate portrayal of the life of a Cumbrian 'statesman', does not offer itself as a model of a larger social order. The idea of poetry as a vehicle for the maintenance of an ideal social consensus gradually gave way to a less holistic concept of poetry as an art whose pleasure and instruction were expected to be more emotionally immediate and more individual dramatically.

The emphasis on greater accuracy of observation in poetry, which Raymond Williams presents as an important oppositional movement to ideological mystification, was largely, I think, a temporary consequence of this transition. In so far as it was not merely a response to the taste for the picturesque, it was a rhetorical innovation used by poets such as Goldsmith and Crabbe to attract attention to what they regarded as unconventional representations of the social order. Though observed detail came to be expected as a desirable ingredient of poetry, accuracy was rarely valued by critics as especially significant in itself. The change in the function of poetry which I have just outlined involved, I wish to argue, more than a greater emphasis on empirical observation and helps to explain why the poetry of, for example, Goldsmith, Burns and Crabbe was rarely valued for its attempt to rearrange the social matrix of its readers while Wordsworth's experiments with individual perception and evaluation were regarded as revolutionary. Decorum, originally a uniformity which combined natural and social order with grace both aesthetic and divine, began to be reinterpreted by reviewers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as a moral orthodoxy based on more private values such as prudence and decency. Gratitude, the quality which complemented the benevolence of

the higher classes in early eighteenth-century pastoral, began to be supplanted by independence as the most common characteristic of the virtuous poor in poetry.

In so far as the rural poor did not conform to such stereotypes those poets who intended their poetry to be more than pastoral fantasy were compelled to alter the expectations of their readers. In poems such as *The Task*, 'The Thorn' and Crabbe's Introduction to *The Borough* the reader is led to accept, by participation in the drama of the poetry, that introspection might occasionally be more appropriate than the more conventional responses of impartial judgment or emotional sympathy. At their most challenging poets no longer connected literary conventions with accepted social ideals but emphasized the fictiveness of such conventions in order to encourage readers to question such ideals. In the Introduction to *The Borough*, for example, Crabbe insists that regularity of style is inimical to accurate representation and hence to social knowledge; Cowper similarly suggests, by his eccentric juxtapositions of colloquial prosaism and blank-verse formality, that a uniform poetic language fails to capture quirky reality. In response to these experiments in technique criticism was increasingly concerned not with discovering the ideal in the conventional but with distinguishing the conventional from the idiosyncratic.

At the same time the major poets concerned with the rural poor, in so far as they rejected conventional notions of decorum, attempted to discover foundations for their poetry which would be more secure than their individual sensibilities and which might survive the scepticism which their experiments induced in their readers. Between the publication of Goldsmith's *The Deserted Village* in 1770 and Crabbe's *Tales* in 1812 the most important innovations in this direction took place - Goldsmith's attempt to merge the poetry of judgment with the poetry of sentiment, Crabbe's aspirations to an impersonal record, Cowper's to a language which transcends convention, Burns's use of Scots vernacular to equate irony with the humane conviviality of the rural poor, Wordsworth's search for a language which would combine the permanence of nature with the passion of suffering. It was this effort to transcend individuality, with its dangers of poetic isolation, rather than the celebration of individuality more commonly associated with Romanticism, that enabled

these poets to survive the weakening of decorum to which poets such as Clare succumbed.

This introduction is merely a rapid, perhaps too abstract, sketch of a broad picture which has emerged from a mass of poems and reviews. If it gives the reader, as it is tested against the chapters that follow, no more than an indication of the assumptions which have directed my thinking, it will have served its purpose. If it clarifies the more detailed attention which I give to poetry and criticism in the text, that is as much as I can hope.

Chapter 2

Decorum: A Complex Word

Virtue...is a very fashionable Word, and some of the most luxurious are extremely fond of the amiable sound; tho' they mean nothing by it, but a great Veneration for whatever is courtly or sublime, and an equal Aversion to every thing, that is vulgar or unbecoming.

(Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*)

It is now widely acknowledged that neoclassical criticism in early eighteenth-century England, despite its well-advertised respect for order, was usually a philosophical confusion, in which, for example, the neo-Platonic concept of intuited ideals was never clearly distinguished from the Aristotelian notion of empirically discovered probabilities and metaphysical theories of literature as a model of an immanent order merged indiscriminately with pragmatic theories which stressed the rhetorical efficacy of an alliance between the universal and the particular.¹ The classical concept of decorum to which neoclassical critics uncertainly aspired has been well defined by Walter Jackson Bate -

[D]ecorum consists in the simultaneous 'preservation and ennobling of the type' - in a faithful adherence to a probability of manners and language in the dramatic character and, at the same time, in a deepening of the import of this probability by disclosing its connection, not merely with temporary or social law, but with that which reason conceives as universal and ideal.²

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1. For an excellent attempt (to which I am indebted for this summary) to disentangle the philosophical strands of neoclassical critical theory, see William Edinger, *Samuel Johnson and Poetic Style* (Chicago and London, 1977), pp. 45-60.
 2. Walter Jackson Bate, *From Classic to Romantic: Premises of Taste in Eighteenth-century England* (Cambridge, Mass., 1946), p. 14.

That a violation of decorum in a poem or a play would also transgress not only the social but also the universal order was a weighty inducement to conformity. The would-be author could at least find some comfort in the thought that he shared the responsibility of maintaining decorum with every other citizen. Lord Kames defined 'the final cause of the sense of propriety' as follows -

It is undoubtedly the interest of every man, to suit his behaviour to the dignity of his nature, and to the station allotted him by providence; for such rational conduct contributes in every respect to happiness, by preserving health, by procuring plenty, by gaining the esteem of others, and, which of all is the greatest blessing, by gaining a justly-founded self-esteem. But in a matter so essential to our well-being, even self-interest is not relied on: the powerful authority of duty is superadded to the motive of interest... Propriety cannot rightly be considered in another light, than as the natural law that regulates our conduct with respect to ourselves; as justice is the natural law that regulates our conduct with respect to others. I call propriety a law, not less than justice; because both are equally rules of conduct that ought to be obey'd...³

Nevertheless, some would gain less comfort from this shared responsibility than others, for its burden was not equally oppressive to all nor were its rewards equally gratifying. The poor were not commonly thought to have much dignity; their interest in acting decorously was obscure, their reward a lonely self-esteem. To the rest of society, however, at least in the early eighteenth century, decorum generally seemed a self-evident arrangement and therefore discussions of it in occasional criticism tend to be circular in a manner similar to, for example, Dryden's argument, in his essay 'A Parallel Betwixt Painting and Poetry', that the noble genres, epic and tragedy, 'ought to have nothing of immoral, low, or filthy in them'.⁴ Disputes tended to concentrate on the question how an existing decorum might best be institutionalized in literary and social rules. For an understanding of some of the axioms of decorum, why immorality was paired with lowness and why the

3. Henry Home, Lord Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, third edition, 2 vols (Edinburgh, 1765), I, p. 332.

4. *Essays of John Dryden*, edited by W.P. Ker, 2 vols (Oxford, 1900), II, p. 129.

poor were confined to the lesser literary genres, it is better to turn to moral philosophy.

Neoclassical ideas of decorum were usually less stable than the classical concept defined by Bate because a less dominant role was assigned to reason. The one observation on which there was a general measure of agreement amongst the most influential moral philosophers in the eighteenth century was that men, though capable of judging conduct rationally, were not motivated to act by reason. If propriety was, as Lord Kames suggested, a natural law, its regulations were less than constraining. Kames acknowledges a gap between particular behaviour and general nature and it is this gap that needs to be fortified with his battery of promised rewards and threatened punishments.

It would be difficult to find a more revealing attempt to reconcile the general with the particular, the theory of decorum with social practice, than Pope's *Essay on Man*, a delicately balanced structure containing in uneasy equilibrium the forces that portend its destruction. In attempting to 'vindicate the ways of God to Man' (I, 16)⁵ while at the same time denouncing presumption, Pope embarks on a dangerously presumptuous enterprise, both theologically and poetically. Moreover, the more skilful his explanations of the universe, the less plausible are his assertions of Man's blind littleness; the more convincingly the poem mirrors the real world, the deeper our unease becomes as it verges on paradox and dissolution. Not surprisingly, Pope often seems to oscillate with the very forces he attempts to place. His command over the poem seems as indefinite as God's over the world. In a poem intended to exemplify reasonable restraint, he frequently resorts to bullying and pleading -

Then say not Man's imperfect, Heav'n in fault;
Say rather, Man's as perfect as he ought;
His knowledge measur'd to his state and place,
His time a moment, and a point his space.
(I, 69-72)

This is a fleeting and tiny perfection. If the reader is to be credited only with the degree of knowledge proper to such transient minuteness, it is perhaps appropriate that Pope seeks not agreement but merely an

5. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Man*, edited by Maynard Mack (London, 1950), p. 14. All quotations from *An Essay on Man* are from this edition.

echo of his own prompting ('say not... Say rather...'). But then such a little learning is almost bound to be dangerous; new vistas will be difficult to ignore.⁶ Pope himself provides, I think, an instance of his own frailty in the above passage. Given the importance of geometry in the moral philosophy of the period owing to the influence of Locke,⁷ perhaps it is not too fanciful to see in line 72 a proposal of the full-stop, the 'point' in the 'space' of the poem, as an ideal figure for Man. If this is the case, it is not only an extraordinary use of the analogy between literary and universal decorum but also an admission of its necessarily limited perfection, for Pope's full-stop, unlike the unimaginable (and therefore unpoetic) Euclidean point, has both position and magnitude. But by allowing even such tiny magnitude Pope rebels against the extremity of his own humiliation of Man (with its implicit denial of poetry). It is true that he reconciles himself to an imperfect rhyme in the above passage but it is significant that he tolerates this qualified perfection for only one couplet.

Whether these inconsistencies between advice and practice could have been deliberate it is not really necessary to decide, for they would provide even stronger evidence for Pope's argument about the frailty of reason if they were accidental. Pope's self-esteem, in struggling against his own advice, is in danger of proving his argument with a perfection which he is attempting to deny. But if Self-love is perpetually at odds with Reason, it is also true that Reason is an unreliable adversary and may covertly change sides, a betrayal apparent, as we have already noted, in Pope's intention to denounce presumption and yet 'vindicate the ways of God to Man' (I, 16). The poem seems to be suspended between two temptations, each of which threaten, by swallowing the middle ground, to undermine Pope's attempt to reconcile his readers to their relative perfection - on the one hand, a perfect recommendation of imperfection which would place the wisdom of God beyond doubt and, on the other hand, the perfect propriety of an imperfect recommendation which would acknowledge Pope's own presumption and therefore his own

6. See *An Essay on Criticism*, 215-232.

7. See Edinger, pp. 43-45.

imperfection. Each of these modes would seem to make Pope's relative perfection absolute and so refute his poem and yet there is no third alternative. It is not surprising that there is a hint of intellectual collapse in Pope's conclusion that

spite of Pride, in erring Reason's spite,
One truth is clear, 'Whatever IS, is RIGHT.'
(I, 293-294)

Pope's aggressive emphasis does not quite obscure the fact that if this truth is clear, then so should be all the others that have eluded 'erring Reason'; once we have acknowledged the rightness of everything, there is nothing left to dispute. If, for the moment, we may be excused for withholding our consent to Pope's conclusion, then perhaps we may also be permitted, in spite of Pope's caveat, to apply our wits to the following -

Attention, habit and experience gains,
Each strengthens Reason, and Self-love restrains.
Let subtle schoolmen teach these friends to fight,
More studious to divide than to unite,
And Grace and Virtue, Sense and Reason split,
With all the rash dexterity of Wit...
(II, 79-84)

Pope is openly divided in his attitude to the schoolmen. Their subtlety is cleverly nimble as well as insidiously superficial; their teaching is not logically in error but 'rash'. Pope concedes argumentation to the schoolmen but reserves wisdom for himself, thus emphasizing a crucial distinction. The many critics of the *Essay on Man* who have complained of 'Pope's weakness in rational argument'⁸ place a degree of emphasis on reason which the poem questions. It is essential to the unsubtle wit of this poem (wit, that is, which is serious and humane enough to be open about its limitations) that Pope should persistently leave the intellectual deficiencies of his argument exposed to betray him in an attempt to preserve the beautifully tentative unity of his theme. The poem is compelling because, in its inevitable seeking for a perfect marriage of art and argument, it is so vulnerable to the implications of its own dialectic. Reason must submit to the proper order because order is fragile; it is fragile because Reason, in learning what precisely

8. The phrase is Thomas R. Edwards's (*This Dark Estate: A Reading of Pope* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1963), p. 43).

to submit to, discovers what seem to be the limits both of itself and of the order it seeks. We attempt to transgress those limits at the cost of having to cope with the consequences of our folly - 'greedy that its object would devour' (II, 89). True wit respects propriety.⁹

These are easy statements but hard practice.

Respecting Man, whatever wrong we call,
May, must be right, as relative to all.

(I, 51-52)

The swift alteration of 'may' to 'must', a rejection of limits, strikes a note which is audible in many similar passages - a strident but anguished assertiveness as Pope, the remorseless hunter after Folly, as he styles himself at the beginning of the poem, hunts down his own doubt and discontent for the sake of his peace of mind. Yet success, we have been taught, would be inhuman. The hesitation is left in the verse to play its part in reassuring us of Pope's less than Olympian involvement in his own argument. The poem bridges but does not disguise its gaping divisions.

Just as wit needs to be tempered by judgment so that human limitations may be turned to advantage,¹⁰ so Pope's one clear truth ('Whatever IS, is RIGHT') is not apparent to Reason alone but to a concordat of Grace, Virtue, Sense and Reason which works, in anticipation of Keats's 'Negative Capability', to restrain men from destroying their

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9. See Pope's letter to Wycherley (20 November, 1707), in which he distinguishes between wit as fancy or conceit and 'the better notion of Wit, consider'd as propriety' (*The Correspondence of Alexander Pope*, edited by George Sherburn, 5 vols (Oxford, 1956), I, 34; quoted in Patricia Meyer Spacks, *An Argument of Images: The Poetry of Alexander Pope* (Cambridge, Mass., 1971), p. 36). See also Edward Niles Hooker, 'Pope on Wit: The *Essay on Criticism*', in *Essential Articles for the Study of Alexander Pope*, edited by Maynard Mack (London, 1964), pp. 175-197, pp. 192-193.
 10. For this interpretation of the relationship between wit and judgment in the *Essay on Criticism*, see Douglas B. Park, '"At Once the Source and End": Nature's Defining Pattern in *An Essay on Criticism*', *PMLA*, 90, 5 (October, 1975), 861-873 (though in arguing that the poem gives us 'a true sense of our vacancies and excesses that we may overcome them' within a higher unity (p. 869), Park, I think, chooses a wrong emphasis; in my view, the poem seeks to restrain the desire to overcome, advocating the necessity of acceptance so that the desire and the necessity are, as in *An Essay on Man*, in constructive opposition).

limited perfection in the name of a grander truth. At the risk of being subtle, however, it is necessary to inquire into the propriety of each of these faculties, 'what *condition* and *relation* it is placed in, and what is the proper *end* and *purpose* of its *being*'.¹¹ Is, for instance, Grace the divine bulwark of human Virtue? Is it the heavenly release from the constraints of human imperfection, as in the *Essay on Criticism* ('snatch a Grace beyond the Reach of Art', 155)?¹² Does it encompass elegance, a matching of social and moral decorum also in the manner of the *Essay on Criticism*? -

Without *Good Breeding*, *Truth* is disapprov'd;
That only makes *Superior Sense* *belov'd*.
(576-577)

And in view of this passage how common is sense in the *Essay on Man*? -

ORDER is Heav'n's first law; and this confest,
Some are, and must be, greater than the rest,
More rich, more wise; but who infers from hence
That such are happier, shocks all common sense.
(IV, 49-52)

Yet this inference was not sufficiently shocking to Pope's common sense to prevent him from writing earlier -

The rich is happy in the plenty giv'n,
The poor contents him with the care of Heav'n.
(II, 265-266)

Not only a schoolman would wish to argue that the happiness of the rich is here superior to the enforced contentment of the poor, a superiority which the ambiguity of 'care' only serves to confirm.

It was the hiatus between description and prescription, 'is' and 'ought', that caused the Augustans so much anxiety. The notion of 'common sense' was supposed to provide one of the bridges -

Common sense sometimes implies no more than that Faculty which is common to all Men but sometimes signifies right Reason and what all Men should consent to.¹³

11. 'The Design', Mack, p. 7.

12. Audra and Williams, p. 258. All quotations from *An Essay on Criticism* are from this edition.

13. *The Spectator*, no. 259, quoted in William Bowman Piper, 'Common Sense as a Basis of Literary Style', *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 18, 4 (Winter, 1977), 624-641, p. 626.

However, this definition merely serves, with its distinction between 'right Reason' and popular understanding, to confirm the confused ambiguity of the phrase, a token for both vulgarity and universality, what the crowd assumes to be true and what the wisest know to be true. This confusion perhaps derives from Descartes's influential definition of '*bons sens*' as a faculty which all men possessed but which yielded the truth only to those who applied it well,¹⁴ a definition which begs the question of proper application. When Pope appeals to 'common sense', he asserts an identity between heavenly laws and earthly practice which is wishful rather than real and which, as we noted, has been implicitly denied even before it is explicitly asserted. The poem's inconsistencies dramatize one of the major metaphysical problems of the early eighteenth century, how to reconcile the will to perfection with the necessary acceptance of imperfection. Pope suggests that the problem is insoluble; 'elemental strife' (I, 169) gives rise to the striving which is the value and purpose of life and which makes the consistency that some critics demand of the poem a sterile but human aim.

Nevertheless, as some, we shall see, were prepared to argue, parrying complaints in the name of an invisible order said to determine the all too visible imperfections of existing society was not necessarily a disinterested activity. If, in spite of Pope's disclaimer, happiness is more closely associated in his mind with the rich than with the poor, then is it fortuitous that riches and wisdom, grace and virtue, good breeding and superiority appear in his verse in juxtaposition? Yet the belief that aesthetic and moral excellence was more properly characteristic of the rich than of the poor attracted Pope's satirical attention - in the *Epistle to Cobham*, for example -

14. See Lee Andrew Elioseff, *The Cultural Milieu of Addison's Literary Criticism* (Austin, 1963), pp. 29-34.

'Tis from high Life high Characters are drawn;
 A Saint in Crape is twice a Saint in Lawn;
 A Judge is just, a Chanc'lor juster still;
 A Gownman, learn'd; a Bishop, what you will;
 Wise, if a Minister; but, if a King,
 More wise, more learn'd, more just, more ev'rything.
 (87-92) 15

and in the *Essay on Criticism* -

let a Lord once own the *happy Lines*,
 How the *Wit brightens*! How the *Style refines*!

But if Pope's common sense is sensitive to the difference between praise and flattery with respect to the upper orders of the social hierarchy, it is not a sensitivity that would presumably have been equally common to the Bishop or Lord. For here we reach one of the limits of the argument in the *Essay on Man*. If Pope's knowledge is 'measur'd to his state and place', then his conception of the rich or poor man will differ from the rich or poor man's conception of himself -

God loves from Whole to Parts: but human soul
 Must rise from Individual to the Whole.
 Self-love but serves the virtuous mind to wake,
 As the small pebble stirs the peaceful lake;
 The centre mov'd, a circle strait succeeds,
 Another still, and still another spreads,
 Friend, parent, neighbour, first it will embrace,
 His country next, and next all human race...

(IV, 361-368)

The man in the centre will view these concentric circles differently from a man on one of the circumferences. And even if we recognize that all points in the lake are potential centres, we must also acknowledge that the concentric circles which each may generate will embrace some potential centres more readily than others. If Pope defines the proprieties of his poems in terms of qualities, such as '*Good Breeding*', more appropriate to the rich than to the poor, this is because of the respective positions of Pope, the rich and the poor in the lake. If Pope does not seem to be aware of this contingency and if his intimations of decorum are obscure and contradictory, this is because only Heaven beholds the lake in its entirety (IV, 372). It is because of 'elemental strife' that the poem's ambiguities are left unresolved, both encouraging and rebuking our

15. Alexander Pope, *Epistles to Several Persons*, edited by F.W. Bateson, second edition (London, 1961), pp. 21-22.

inquisitiveness. The *Essay on Man* blurs at the edges because it is, and can only be, a view from the centre and not from above.¹⁶

It is not surprising that in a discussion of the *Essay on Man* the *Essay on Criticism* should frequently come to mind. In the latter poem Pope anticipated his argument that wisdom consists in the recognition and acceptance of proper limits, that the order of all depends on the humility of each and the fulfilment of each on the conformity of all -

Each might his *sev'ral Province* well command,
Wou'd all but *stoop* to what they *understand*.
(66-67)

David Morris has suggested that two of the guiding principles of the *Essay on Criticism* are propriety, an elastic principle of harmonious relationship, and generosity, which, in tempering intellectual judgment with ethical awareness, elevates criticism to the level of a moral art.¹⁷ Moral and aesthetic propriety were rarely differentiated in the early eighteenth century. 'All beauty is truth', wrote the third earl of Shaftesbury.¹⁸ 'The final end of poetry', wrote John Dennis, 'is to reform the manners'.¹⁹ Poetry was evaluated with reference to the same standards as manners; criticism was expected to be as beneficial as poetry. If, as Pope asserted, good breeding was an essential attribute of the critic, the word 'good' was not an idle part of the requirement;

16. See F.E.L. Priestley's summary of Pope's argument -
Man, being finite, cannot know - in the sense of fully comprehend - the infinite; being but a part, and a small part, of a 'stupendous Whole', he cannot know the total pattern, function, and purpose of that whole. He can only reason within the limits of the range of his survey, piecing together by *a posteriori* reasoning tentative conclusions that seem probable.
('"Order, Union, Full Consent of Things!"', *University of Toronto Quarterly*, 42, 1 (Fall, 1972), 1-13, p. 1).
17. David B. Morris, 'Civilized Reading: The Act of Judgment in *An Essay on Criticism*', in *The Art of Alexander Pope*, edited by Howard Erskine-Hill and Anne Smith (London, 1979), pp. 15-39.
18. Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times, etc.*; edited by John M. Robertson, 2 vols (London, 1900), I, p. 94.
19. John Dennis, *The Grounds of Criticism in Poetry* (1704), in *Eighteenth-century Critical Essays*, edited by Scott Elledge, 2 vols (Ithaca, New York, 1961), I, pp. 100-142, p. 103.

if the critic were becoming in style, he would also be more likely to be virtuous in intention. According to Shaftesbury -

A man of thorough good breeding, whatever else he be, is incapable of doing a rude or brutal action. He never deliberates in this case, or considers of the matter by prudential rules of self-interest and advantage. He acts from his nature, in a manner necessarily, and without reflection; and if he did not, it were impossible for him to answer his character, or be found that truly well-bred man on every occasion.²⁰

The well-bred man, Shaftesbury thought, is compelled by a necessity of the natural order. His own sense of propriety will be attuned to the proprieties of the universe. Thus, in introducing a study of 'beauty in inward sentiments and principles', Shaftesbury comments -

Whoever has any impression of what we call gentility or politeness is already so acquainted with the decorum and grace of things that he will readily confess a pleasure and enjoyment in the very survey and contemplation of this kind.²¹

But if Shaftesbury's man was less in need of the inducements of self-interest than Kames's, Shaftesbury nevertheless recognized 'different tunings of the passions'.²² If the individual's tuning were less than fine, his actions would be less than sophisticated. Civilization was proper only as a process of increasing accommodation of imperfect man to a more or less regular universe.

Breeding, in Shaftesbury's usage, was not an acquirement but a natural, though improvable, receptivity to a pervading harmony -

'Tis a due sentiment of morals which alone can make us knowing in order and proportion, and give us the just tone and measure of human passion.²³

Although to a modern sensibility Shaftesbury's use of 'knowing' here may savour of *savoir-faire*, it is unlikely to have been disingenuous. A civilized attitude indicated a spiritual knowledge, according to a network of relations similar to that suggested by Bishop Warburton's commentary on the *Essay on Man* -

20. Robertson, I, p. 86.

21. Ibid., II, pp. 266-267.

22. Ibid., I, p. 291.

23. Ibid., p. 181.

The system of the Universe is a combination of *natural* and *moral* Fitnesses, as the human system is, of *body* and *spirit*.²⁴

On all levels and in all aspects of being the universe, Shaftesbury and others thought, was regulated by an essential order and proportion, tone and measure, which manifested itself in the individual as 'a due sentiment' - 'The *venustum*, the *honestum*, the *decorum* of things will force its way'.²⁵ Nevertheless, because good breeding was not equally shared by all, some would prove more resistant to 'the *decorum* of things' than others, though no-one could be completely ill-bred or wholly evil - 'They who refuse to give it scope in the nobler subjects of a rational and moral kind will find its prevalency elsewhere in an inferior order of things'.²⁶

In *An Inquiry Concerning Virtue or Merit* Shaftesbury referred to 'the meanest subjects of the world' in a passage of significant ambiguity -

In the meanest subjects of the world, the appearance of order gains upon the mind and draws the affection towards it. But if the order of the world itself appears just and beautiful, the admiration and esteem of order must run higher, and the elegant passion or love of beauty, which is so advantageous to virtue, must be the more improved by its exercise in so ample and magnificent a subject.²⁷

Of course, the primary meaning of this passage is that the more the world accommodates itself to the universal order, the stronger and more prevalent will be the love of beauty and therefore of virtue. The quality of beauty and goodness reflects the quality of their sources and therefore even though order may be apparent in the least likely things, the perception of order and hence of beauty and virtue in more elevated objects will be purer. But to the eighteenth-century mind 'the meanest subjects' were also known as 'the lower orders' to whom the idea of a comprehensive order was less apparent and whose passions were not often regarded as elegant -

24. *The Works of Alexander Pope*, edited by W. Warburton, 9 vols (London, 1751), III, p. 6.

25. Robertson, I, p. 92.

26. Id.

27. Ibid., p. 279.

Whoever has been an observer of action and grace in human bodies must of necessity have discovered the great difference in this respect between such persons as have been taught by nature only, and such as by reflection and the assistance of art have learnt to form those motions which on experience are found the easiest and most natural. Of the former kind are either those good rustics who have been bred remote from the formed societies of men, or those plain artisans and people of lower rank who, in living in cities and places of resort, have been necessitated however to follow mean employments, and wanted the opportunity and means to form themselves after the better models... 'Tis undeniable...that the perfection of grace and comeliness in action and behaviour can be found only among the people of a liberal education.²⁸

If good breeding, the source of virtue and taste, was not merely a social acquirement, it was also not, at least not yet, a natural inclination to which the poor were as equally prone as the wealthy.

Bernard Mandeville interpreted this attitude in his characteristically blunt and provocative but penetrating manner; 'to me', says Horatio, the disciple of Shaftesbury in the second part of *The Fable of the Bees*, 'it seems to be more difficult to be virtuous without Money, than with'.²⁹ In *An Enquiry into the Origin of Moral Virtue* Mandeville provides a similarly sober commentary on Shaftesbury's attitude to the rude actions of the ill-bred; while discussing the education of children, he writes of 'Boys, whom they'll strive to persuade, that all fine Gentlemen do as they are bid, and that none but Beggar Boys are rude, or dirty their Clothes'.³⁰ To Mandeville the idea of universal harmony expressing itself in social order was a far from disinterested justification of existing society, the public face of private vice. Shaftesbury's hierarchy of beauty, virtue and elegance masked the real hierarchy of wealth and power. True virtue, he argued, could only be an honest admission of vice and a recognition of the fact that many vices which men castigated, such as luxury, were socially necessary.

28. Ibid., pp. 124-125.

29. Bernard Mandeville, *The Fable of the Bees*, edited by F.B. Kaye, 2 vols (Oxford, 1924), II, p. 114.

30. Ibid., I, p. 54.

Mandeville realized that one of the weakest points of Shaftesbury's doctrine was his attitude to the poor, a weakness disguised by Shaftesbury's insistence on conducting moral discourse with an aesthetic elegance which largely precluded reference to the poor. Cleomenes, generally Mandeville's spokesman in the second part of *The Fable of the Bees*, decides to put Shaftesbury to the test -

Cleo. If we see an industrious poor Woman, who has pinch'd her Belly, and gone in Rags for a considerable time to save forty Shillings, part with her Money to put out her Son at six Years of Age to a Chimney-sweeper; to judge of her charitably according to the System of the Social Virtues we must imagine, That tho' she never paid for the sweeping of a Chimney in her Life, she knows by Experience that for want of this necessary Cleanliness the Broth has been often spoyl'd, and many a Chimney has been set o' Fire, and therefore to do good in her Generation, as far as she is able, she gives up her All, both Offspring and Estate, to assist in preventing the several Mischiefs that are often occasion'd by great Quantities of Soot disregarded; and, free from Selfishness, sacrifices her only Son to the most wretched Employment for the Publick Welfare.

Hor. You don't vy I see with Lord *Shaftesbury*, for Loftiness of Subjects.³¹

Horatio should have been alerted by certain of Cleomenes's phrases ('sacrifices her only Son') to the possibility of an anagogical reading of his parable. Shaftesbury's definition of 'Loftiness' must be deficient if it is inappropriate to the story of Christ; is elegance, then, a reliable indication of virtue?³² As far as Horatio is concerned,

31. Ibid., II, pp. 43-44.

32. Even if Horatio had noticed the analogy, he might still have missed the irony. In the course of an earlier discussion about whether it was possible to portray the Nativity accurately in painting without causing offence to those of true taste, Horatio was led to remark - 'In a Country Stable, Madam, there is nothing but Filth and Nastiness, or vile abject Things not fit to be seen, at least not capable of entertaining Persons of Quality' (ibid., p. 34). Shaftesbury himself was not enamoured of conventional representations of Christ in art, as his notes for an essay entitled 'Plastics' reveal -

Chief support of painting what? - Xt! - Wretched model. Barbarian. No form, no grace of shoulders, breast, no *démarche*, air, majesty, grandeur, a lean uncomely proportion and species, a mere Jew or Hebrew (originally an ugly scabby people) both shape and physique, with half beard peaked, not one or the other. Lank clinging hair, snivelling face, hypocritical canting countenance and at best melancholy, mad and enthusiastical in the common and lower way, not so well as even the bacchanals and bacchantes.

(Anthony Ashley Cooper, Earl of Shaftesbury, *Second Characters; or, The Language of Forms*, edited by Benjamin Rand (Cambridge, Mass., 1914), p.120)

however, Cleomenes is attempting to bring together opposite ends of 'the System of the Social Virtues'; the poor women, at the bottom of the scale, lacks the prerequisites for virtue.

Hor. Can any one in his Senses imagine, that an indigent thoughtless Wretch, without Sense or Education, should ever act from such generous Principles?³³

Mandeville here entangles Horatio in a terminological net. If anyone not 'in his Senses' is to be defined as mad, is it not reckless to deny 'Sense' to the poor? If, on the other hand, 'Sense' is to be distinguished from 'Senses', can that be common sense? It would be wrong to make too much of a momentary glibness but if Horatio would not have countenanced my glosses, then in what sense are the poor 'without Sense'? Shaftesbury as a deist discounted the possibility of virtue being dependent on divine revelation. Yet he would deny all but a rudimentary form of the sense for virtue to the majority of the population and at the same time remain confident of social order.

Cleomenes's retort was obvious -

[I]f the Vulgar are to be excluded from the Social Virtues, what Rule or Instruction shall the labouring Poor, which are by far the greatest part of the Nation, have left them to walk by, when the *Characteristicks* have made a Jest of all reveal'd Religion, especially the Christian?³⁴

Mandeville knew that the poor were driven by necessities more real than the universal impulse of a putative natural order. However, it would be mistaken to conclude from this that he was a humanitarian. In *An Essay on Charity and Charity Schools* he argued that a society to which vice was integral depended on the oppression of the poor for its continuance -

33. Kaye, II, p. 47.

34. Id. At one point in the *Miscellaneous Reflections* Shaftesbury wonders whether religious superstition might serve as moral guidance 'among the vulgar' in place of the moral sense - 'A devil and a hell may prevail where a jail and gallows are thought insufficient' (Robertson, II, p. 265). In context, however, it is clear that this is merely a further attempt to parody religious orthodoxy -

If there be on earth a proper way to render the most sacred truths suspected, 'tis by supporting it with threats, and pretending to terrify people into the belief of it.

(Robertson, II, p. 222)

It is impossible that a Society can long subsist, and suffer many of its Members to live in Idleness, and enjoy all the Ease and Pleasure they can invent, without having at the same time great Multitudes of People that to make good this Defect will condescend to be quite the reverse, and by use and patience inure their Bodies to work for others and themselves besides.³⁵

The hardship of the many was the precondition of the comfort of the few. Since the many would never knowingly agree to this arrangement, they had to be kept as ignorant as possible. If, as Shaftesbury had implied, education was the only means of making the poor virtuous, then the poor either had to remain vicious or acquire virtue at the cost of making an elegant way of life, and therefore, Shaftesbury would have to conclude, virtue itself, impossible. It is always difficult to discern Mandeville's real beliefs in his ironic treatments of other people's doctrines. However, Cleomenes, at least, would not have accepted the premise which led to the impasse just outlined -

Vice and what is criminal are not to be confounded with Roughness and want of Manners, no more than Politeness and an artful Behaviour ought to be with Virtue or Religion... [I]f there are some Vices, which the Vulgar are more guilty of than the better sort, there are others the Reverse. Envy, Detraction, and the Spirit of Revenge, are more raging and mischievous in Courts than they are in Cottages. Excess of Vanity and hurtful Ambition are unknown among the Poor; they are seldom tainted with Avarice, with Irreligion never; and they have much less Opportunity of robbing the Publick than their Betters.³⁶

Both vice and virtue may be found throughout society. A common description - 'the better sort', 'their Betters' - is exposed as a travesty. However, even if the rich depend on the maintenance of poverty for their comforts, poverty has its own advantages; since the poor rarely achieve social promotion, they are seldom tempted by its associated sins. Perhaps in the fact that Cleomenes presents this blessing as the dubious consequence of incapacity we catch a glimpse of Mandeville's sardonic honesty.

Francis Hutcheson attempted to defend Shaftesbury against what he regarded as Mandeville's calumny but in doing so he modified many of Shaftesbury's positions. Shaftesbury thought that men were motivated by a natural tendency to virtue which was nevertheless subject to

35. Ibid., I, p. 286.

36. Ibid., II, p. 60.

unnatural deterioration; the moral sense could be improved by education. Hutcheson similarly postulated a fundamental moral sense but thought that it could be led astray by associations of ideas introduced by custom or education.³⁷ To Hutcheson the connection between virtue and '*Ideas of Property*, and the *Desire of Distinction*'³⁸ was one such false association. Although Shaftesbury had similarly distinguished between the attractions of 'outward subjects', such as 'plate, jewels, apartments, coronets, patents of honour, titles or precedencies', and the beauty of the 'inward character',³⁹ Hutcheson went further and was reluctant to draw an analogy between virtue and elegance. This is not to say that he drew a distinction between the sense for virtue and the sense for beauty. On the contrary, he argued that

there is a great moral necessity...that the internal sense of men should be constituted as it is at present so as to make uniformity amidst variety the occasion of pleasure.⁴⁰

Like Shaftesbury, Hutcheson considered that the sense for beauty and goodness alike found most satisfaction in regularity and uniformity, thus ensuring the continuance of order. Like Shaftesbury also, Hutcheson conceded that the imperfect sensibility might be more drawn to the imperfectly regular or virtuous in art than to perfect regularity or virtue.⁴¹

Even though Hutcheson questioned Shaftesbury's amalgamation of virtue and elegance, he retained the emphasis on uniformity which could still militate against the poor, as an observation of Mandeville's makes clear -

37. See, for example, Francis Hutcheson, *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections* (1728), facsimile reprint (Menston, 1972), pp. 9-11; Francis Hutcheson, *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, edited by Peter Kivy (The Hague, 1973), pp. 82-87.

38. *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*, p. 171.

39. Robertson, II, p. 278.

40. *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, p. 92.

41. *Ibid.*, p. 55.

There are every where slovenly sorry Fellows that are used to be seen always Ragged and Dirty: These People we look upon as miserable Creatures in general, and unless they are very remarkable we take little Notice of them, and yet among these there are handsome and well-shaped Men as well as among their Betters. But if one of these turns Soldier, what a vast Alteration is there observ'd in him for the better, as soon as he is put in his Red Coat, and we see him look smart with his Grenadier's Cap and a great Ammunition Sword! All who knew him before are struck with other Ideas of his Qualities, and the Judgment which both Men and Women form of him in their Minds is very different from what it was. There is something Analogous to this in the Sight of Charity Children; there is a natural Beauty in Uniformity which most People delight in. It is diverting to the Eye to see Children well match'd, either Boys or Girls, march two and two in good order; and to have them all whole and tight in the same Clothes and Trimming must add to the comeliness of the sight... Our Parish Church, Our Charity Children. In all this there is a Shadow of Property that tickles every body...⁴²

'There is a natural Beauty in Uniformity which most People delight in' - the insouciance with which this sentiment parrots Shaftesbury while at the same time hinting that some people might have reason not to delight in it is characteristically Mandevilleian. The 'Shadow of Property' survives in Hutcheson's work; the poor were more likely than the rich to be 'Ragged' and therefore to appear vicious. One would expect Pope to have been especially sensitive to the imputation of vice to deformity. Joseph Warton, quoting Francis Bacon, referred to this with considerable tact in his *Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope* -

[E]ven his bodily make was of use to him as a writer; for one who was acquainted with the heart of man, and the secret springs of our actions, has observed with great penetration; "It is good to consider deformity, not as a signe which is more deceivable but as a cause, which seldom faileth of the effect. Whosoever hath any thing fixed in his person, that doth induce contempt, hath also a perpetual spur in himselfe, to rescue and deliver himself from scorne".⁴³

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42. Kaye, I, pp. 281-282. A similar irony informs the diverting spectacle of the regimented charity children in Blake's 'Holy Thursday' in the *Songs of Innocence* ('The children walking two and two in red and blue and green', 2).
43. Joseph Warton, *An Essay on the Genius and Writings of Pope*, third edition, 2 vols (London, 1772-1782), I (1772), p. 106.

This passage occurs in the course of a commentary on the *Essay on Criticism*, in which Pope himself alludes to the deceptiveness of deformity; what may appear mis-shapen may actually be part of a larger regularity -

Some Figures *monstrous* and *mis-shap'd* appear,
Consider'd *singly*, or beheld too *near*,
Which, but proportion'd to their *Light* and *Place*,
Due Distance *reconciles* to Form and Grace.

(171-174)

Once again, as in the *Essay on Man*, the potentially ambiguous 'Grace' hints at a divinely sanctioned propriety. Just as true elegance consists in adapting one's behaviour to one's appointed lot, that is, in accommodating grace to Grace, so a turn of phrase which seems excessive out of context may actually be appropriate to the basic design of the work. When we also reflect on the fact that the creator of this particular rhetorical figure accepted the complex associations of order with virtue and deformity with vice, other shades of meaning press for attention. Under their darker influence the passage becomes a plea to God and man for acceptance. In the juxtaposition of 'Light', 'reconciles' and 'Grace', for example, we may perhaps infer a moving faith in God's forgiveness, which expresses an anxiety in Pope's attitude to his own deformity at the same time as it works towards assuaging it; 'Due Distance' suggests resignation to a lonely separateness.⁴⁴ What Hutcheson referred to as the 'universal theorems',⁴⁵ the networks of relations or 'Fitnesses' by which an attitude to a rhetorical figure implied an attitude to a life, could be oppressive as well as enlightening. It is true that Hutcheson altered the social associations of virtue, praising the

44. In the second part of *The Fable of the Bees* Horatio draws an analogy between deformity and vice that is relevant here; he refers to Mandeville's own philosophy as

the Scheme of Deformity, the Partizans of which study chiefly to make every thing in our Nature appear as ugly and contemptible as it is possible, and take uncommon Pains to perswade Men that they are Devils.

(Kaye, II, p. 30)

Horatio's own philosophy, we may infer from his associations, would persuade only deformed men that they are devils.

45. *An Inquiry Concerning Beauty, Order, Harmony, Design*, p. 90.

'noble Dispositions, *Humility, Compassion, Industry, Hardiness of Temper and Courage*, the Offspring of the sober rigid Dame *Poverty*'⁴⁶ rather than 'the gay Notions of *Pleasantry, Genteelness, Politeness*'.⁴⁷ In doing so, however, he replaced one uniformity with another which, in its relation to the particular case of Mandeville's 'poor industrious woman', remained ambivalent.

David Hume was not as sanguine as Hutcheson about the attractiveness of poverty -

[W]hen a poor man appears, the disagreeable images of want, penury, hard labour, dirty furniture, coarse or ragged clothes, nauseous meat and distasteful liquor, immediately strike our fancy.⁴⁸

Since the purpose of poetry, according to Hume, was to entertain the fancy,⁴⁹ he was presumably sceptical about the possibility of accurate representation of the poor in poetry. He defined beauty and virtue as that which produces pleasure, deformity and vice as that which causes pain.⁵⁰ We admire the wealthy because, by a process of sympathy, we feel the pleasure that we would gain from being in the rich man's position; conversely, we despise the poor because of a feeling of aversion which is also, in Hume's sense, sympathetic -

[T]here remains nothing, which can give us an esteem for power and riches, and a contempt for meanness and poverty, except the principle of *sympathy*, by which we enter into the sentiments of the rich and poor, and partake of their pleasures and uneasiness.⁵¹

Hence 'we remove the poor as far from us as possible'.⁵² Or, as Mandeville

46. *An Essay on the Nature and Conduct of the Passions and Affections*, p. 194.

47. *Ibid.*, p. 170.

48. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, third edition, revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), pp. 247-248.

49. See, for example, David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L.A. Selby-Bigge, second edition (Oxford, 1896), p. 358.

50. *Ibid.*, pp. 296, 298.

51. *Ibid.*, p. 362.

52. *Ibid.*, p. 307.

pointed out, we endeavour to adapt the poor to a 'good order'. Hume does not indiscriminately associate virtue with wealth, however. We do not admire avarice or prodigality, for instance, because neither is conducive to pleasure.⁵³ In fact, Hume provides a list of virtues - discretion, caution, enterprise, industry, assiduity, frugality, economy, good-sense, prudence, discernment, temperance, sobriety, patience, constancy, perseverance, forethought, considerateness, secrecy, order, insinuation, address, presence of mind, quickness of conception, facility of expression, benevolence, patriotism, humanity. Either 'their merit consists in their tendency to serve the person, possessed of them' or they promote 'the good of the community' and therefore are 'loved, praised, and esteemed by the community, on account of that utility and interest, of which every one partakes'.⁵⁴ Although Hume retained the analogy between virtue and beauty, his listed virtues are less amenable to aesthetic pleasure than Shaftesbury's good breeding. Pleasure embraced, on the one hand, elegance and propriety in literature, still regarded by Hume as the common conception of beauty,⁵⁵ and, on the other, industry and prudence in conduct; the relation between good literature and good conduct was now less direct.

A further qualification needs to be made concerning Hume's association of virtue with wealth. Hume did not disagree with Hutcheson that such an association was irrational -

A man who has cured himself of all ridiculous prepossessions, and is fully, sincerely, and steadily convinced, from experience as well as philosophy, that the difference of fortune makes less difference in happiness than is vulgarly imagined; such a one does not measure out degrees of esteem according to the rent-rolls of his acquaintance.⁵⁶

Nevertheless, he considered that vice and virtue were defined according to common human nature and not reason. In fact, refined sense he thought

53. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 238.

54. *Ibid.*, pp. 242-243.

55. David Hume, *Four Dissertations* (London, 1757), p. 204.

56. *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, p. 248.

less 'useful' than common sense; the latter 'capacitates a man best for the world'.⁵⁷

Whereas Hume had regarded a common aversion to the poor man as axiomatic, Adam Smith investigated its sources -

What then is the cause of our aversion to his situation, and why should those who have been educated in the higher ranks of life, regard it as worse than death, to be reduced to live, even without labour, upon the same simple fare with him, to dwell under the same lowly roof, and to be clothed in the same humble attire?⁵⁸

Smith first discounted all 'rational' explanations - a labourer's wages are more than sufficient to provide a subsistence and his way of life is more conducive to well-being than a rich man's. Nevertheless, wealth is more admired than poverty because, firstly, there is a natural and common desire for attention and approval, which is the means of determining vice and virtue, and, secondly, there is a similarly natural and common love of system, which is the means of determining beauty and ugliness. By a process of sympathy we realize that we should feel in the rich man's position pleasure similar to that which he himself must feel from the attention which he receives and from the completeness with which his life has been contrived so as to satisfy his wants.⁵⁹ It will have been noticed that Smith preserves an analogy between what we may for convenience call the moral and the aesthetic sense, provided we remember that in Smith's philosophy they bear little resemblance to Shaftesbury's natural inclination to virtue and beauty. However, these senses are now more than ever differentiated. Smith thought that the aesthetic sense was much more capricious and subject to external influence than the moral sense -

57. Ibid., p. 241.

58. Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, edited by D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie (Oxford, 1976), p. 50.

59. T.D. Campbell draws a distinction between Hume's and Smith's idea of sympathy - Hume's sympathy, he argues, is equivalent to empathy, that is, an actual transference of emotion from the agent to the spectator, whereas Smith's sympathy refers to the capacity of the spectator to imagine himself in the agent's position (T.D. Campbell, *Adam Smith's Science of Morals* (London, 1971), pp. 95-96).

The principles of imagination, upon which our sense of beauty depends, are of a very nice and delicate nature, and may easily be altered by habit and education; but the sentiments of moral approbation and disapprobation, are founded on the strongest and most vigorous passions of human nature; and though they may be somewhat warped, cannot be entirely perverted.⁶⁰

Just as the moral and the aesthetic sense, in Smith's philosophy, are relatively distinct, so Smith further weakens the analogy between virtue and elegance. In the first book of *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, entitled 'Of Propriety', Smith consolidates a tendency in eighteenth-century moral philosophy to differentiate between kinds of virtue on the basis of social rank. Whereas Pope and Shaftesbury had defined social propriety merely as adapting one's behaviour to one's circumstances, Smith distinguishes between an outward elegance, appropriate to the higher classes, and the strenuous attention to inner character proper to the middling and inferior classes. In 1739 the Earl of Chesterfield had advised his son in a series of letters as to the degrees of politeness appropriate, on the one hand, to those of equal and superior rank and, on the other, to those inferior --

La politesse dont je vous ai parlé, mon cher, dans mes précédentes, ne regarde que vos égaux, et vos supérieurs; mais il y a aussi une certaine politesse, que vous devez à vos inférieurs; elle est différente à la vérité, mais aussi qui ne l'a pas n'a sûrement pas le cœur bon.⁶¹

Such advice would have seemed peculiarly aristocratic to Adam Smith twenty years later in 1759 when *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* was first published. According to Smith, a man who is not great but who imitates the manners of greatness will merely attract contempt - 'Politeness is so much the virtue of the great, that it will do little honour to any body but themselves'.⁶² The private man must instead cultivate knowledge and industry, probity and prudence, generosity and frankness.⁶³ Although theoretically Smith does not construct a hierarchy of virtues, he makes

60. Raphael and Macfie, p. 200.

61. *The Letters of the Earl of Chesterfield to his Son*, edited by Charles Strachey and Annette Calthrop, 2 vols (London, 1901), I, p. 45.

62. Raphael and Macfie, p. 54.

63. Ibid., p. 55.

little attempt to distinguish between the great man's 'elegant and graceful sense of his own superiority'⁶⁴ and 'the external graces, the frivolous accomplishments of that impertinent and foolish thing called a man of fashion'.⁶⁵ On the other hand, he devotes to prudence an entire section of his book, in which description and advocacy are not clearly distinguished -

As prudence combined with other virtues, constitutes the noblest; so imprudence combined with other vices, constitutes the vilest of all characters.⁶⁶

A similar, though more open, distinction between the great and the middling underlines Hume's essay 'Of the Middle Station of Life', written in order to

persuade such of my readers as are placed in the middle station to be satisfied with it, as the most eligible of all others. These form the most numerous rank of men that can be supposed susceptible of philosophy; and therefore all discourses of morality ought principally to be addressed to them. The great are too much immersed in pleasure, and the poor too much occupied in providing for the necessities of life, to hearken to the calm voice of reason.⁶⁷

Like Hume, Smith thought that some men were more attracted to wisdom than to wealth and therefore were less likely to associate wealth with virtue. Nevertheless, these men were greatly outnumbered -

They are the wise and the virtuous chiefly, a select, though, I am afraid, but a small party, who are the real and steady admirers of wisdom and virtue. The great mob of mankind are the admirers and worshippers, and, what may seem extraordinary, most frequently the disinterested admirers and worshippers, of wealth and greatness.⁶⁸

Smith is able to distinguish between the true and the common idea of virtue because he distinguishes between love of praise and love of praiseworthiness. It is the latter which is the most reliable determinant

64. Ibid., p. 54.

65. Ibid., p. 63.

66. Ibid., p. 217.

67. David Hume, *Essays Moral, Political and Literary* (Oxford, 1963), p. 579.

68. Raphael and Macfie, p. 62.

of virtue. Nevertheless, like Hume, Smith thought that the common tendency to admire wealth was a useful one. Men were more likely to respect industry and the social order if they admired wealth than if they admired poverty.⁶⁹

As the analogy between virtue and elegance further weakened, however, the willingness to deplore the common associations of wealth and greatness with virtue and vice with poverty became more common and less qualified. Archibald Alison, for example, in his influential *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, ignored Smith's minimal distinction between fashion and greatness and confined to 'the young and the frivolous' what he called the 'slighter associations' -

[T]hey who are most liable to the seduction of Fashion, are people on whose minds the slighter associations have a strong effect. A plain man is incapable of such associations: a man of sense is above them; but the young and the frivolous, whose principles of Taste are either unformed, or whose minds are unable to maintain any settled opinions, are apt to lose sight of every other quality in such objects, but their relation to the practice of the great, and of course, to suffer their sentiments of beauty to vary with the caprice of this practice.⁷⁰

Jane Nardin has pointed out that in Jane Austen's novels elegance often disguises a lack of moral sense.⁷¹ As the associations of greatness began to seem capricious, what Smith had regarded as a major foundation of the social order began to collapse; moral philosophy entered the arena of political controversy. Tom Paine, for example, argued in the *Rights of Man* that the moral and social hierarchies were completely distinct -

Whether in heaven or in hell, or in whatever state man may be supposed to exist hereafter, the good and the bad are the only distinctions. Nay, even the laws of government are obliged to slide into this principle, by making degrees to consist in crimes and not in persons.⁷²

69. Ibid., pp. 183-185, 225-226.

70. Archibald Alison, *Essay on the Nature and Principles of Taste* (Edinburgh, 1790), p. 76.

71. Jane Nardin, *Those Elegant Decorums: The Concept of Propriety in Jane Austen's Novels* (New York, 1973), p. 12.

72. *The Complete Writings of Thomas Paine*, edited by Philip S. Foner, 2 vols (New York, 1945), I, pp. 274-275.

Social status, lacking justification, had to give way before natural equality - 'The artificial NOBLE shrinks into a dwarf before the NOBLE of Nature'.⁷³ It is in this context that Edmund Burke's famous lament for 'the age of chivalry' is best understood. Society, stripped of its degrees of moral authority, would, he feared, revert to a primitive state of aggression and fear; reason was inadequate to restrain folly -

All the pleasing illusions, which made power gentle, and obedience liberal, which harmonized the different shades of life, and which, by a bland assimilation, incorporated into politicks the sentiments which beautify and soften private society, are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be rudely torn off. All the super-added ideas, furnished from the wardrobe of a moral imagination, which the heart owns, and the understanding ratifies, as necessary to cover the defects of our naked, shivering nature, and to raise it to dignity in our own estimation, are to be exploded as a ridiculous, absurd, and antiquated fashion.⁷⁴

Many feared, like Burke, that decorum had been irremediably breached by the French Revolution.

In England, however, this process bore only the appearance of disruption. The consensus with respect to aesthetic propriety had merely become a consensus with respect to aesthetic proprieties; it eventually became clear that the notion of moral propriety, while seeming to split completely from the social order, had actually only moved down the social scale. As it became difficult to marry an aesthetic and a moral emphasis on regularity, there was a greater readiness to explore the limits of the analogy. Frances Reynolds, for example, in a treatise printed in 1785 but never published, agreed that 'it is...the moral truth, that is the characteristic truth of beauty'.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, in a diagrammatic representation of 'the progressive stages or degrees of

73. Ibid., p. 289.

74. Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, edited by W. Alison Phillips and Catherine Beatrice Phillips (Cambridge, 1912), pp. 77-78.

75. Frances Reynolds, *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Taste, and of the Origin of our Ideas of Beauty, etc* (1785), *Augustan Reprint Society*, no. 27 (Los Angeles, 1951), p. 20.

human excellence',⁷⁶ beauty and truth are positioned only midway in a cone, towards the base of which is common sense, described as 'mediocrity'.⁷⁷ At the cone's summit is sublimity, 'a pinnacle of beatitude, bordering upon horror, deformity, madness!'.⁷⁸ It is only superficially paradoxical that the height of excellence should here verge on what had hitherto been regarded as its nadir; the separating border was still quite firm and the cone still regular. A less partisan representation of excellence might have been a level series of compartments, the sublime, the picturesque and the beautiful, each with its own claims to truth and none detracting from the others.

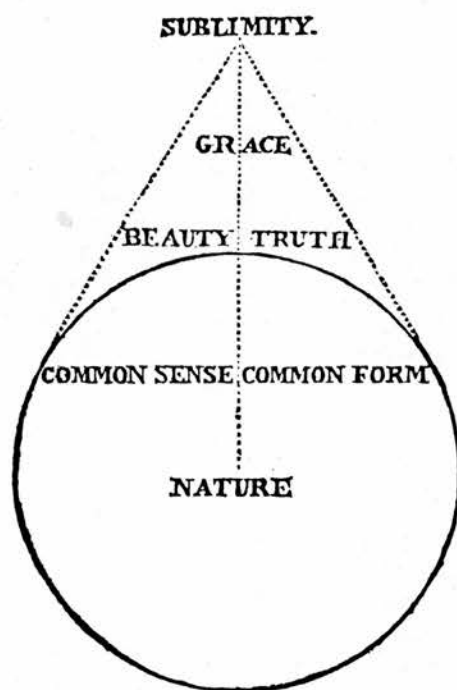
If not everyone in 1785 would have been as partial to the sublime as Frances Reynolds, most would have agreed with her separation of grace and truth. As Adam Smith had anticipated, prudence now seemed closer to true virtue than elegance. Nevertheless, although moralists and critics alike began to be alert to the moral differences between the superior and the middling stations of life, they remained less sensitive to the differences between the middling and inferior stations. Mandeville's quip, that it is more difficult to be virtuous without money than with, was as apt and as neglected at the end of the century and beyond as it had been at the beginning. In the latter half of the eighteenth century Smith's private virtues, industry and prudence, were applied to the poor not as descriptions but as exhortations; Hannah More, for example, in her tract *Village Politics*, advises the poor to 'study to be quiet, work with your own hands, and mind your own business'.⁷⁹ Whereas for other classes it could still be assumed that whatever they approved or disapproved would more or less accord with the social order, many now suggested that this was an unsafe basis for the morality of the poor. As a justification for his book *The Poor Man's Moralists*, a collection of useful maxims published in 1798, Dr Townson wrote that

76. Ibid., pp. 2-3.

77. Ibid., p. 5.

78. Ibid., p. 18.

79. Hannah More, *Village Politics*, second edition (London, 1793), p. 24.



'the most illiterate...have only for their guide in life, (on which their present and future happiness depends) the conduct and the opinions of their companions'.⁸⁰ George Chapman, in his popular *Treatise on Education*, discussed 'those who are destined for employments' -

Above all, they ought to be carefully instructed in the principles of religion and morality... To reconcile the lowest class of mankind to the fatigues of constant labour, and the otherwise mortifying thoughts of a servile employment, pains should be taken to convince them, when young, that subordination is necessary to society; that they ought to submit to their superiors in every thing that is lawful; that nature has formed us for action; that happiness does not consist in indolence, nor in the possession of riches, nor in the gratification of sense, nor in pomp and splendid equipage, but in habits of industry and contentment, in temperance and frugality, in the consciousness of doing our duty in the station in which we are placed...⁸¹

It was only gradually conceded that the poor man possessed and retained in maturity a natural aesthetic sense; moreover, it was never more than a ruder, if more vigorous, version of educated taste.⁸² Similarly the moral sense of the poor was commonly regarded as either weak and susceptible or crude and dangerous. If he was not to be lost to the 'new conquering empire of light and reason', the poor man could not be safely left in Mandevillian ignorance. He had to be educated into the morality of Smith's private man but cautiously. Whereas the private man could be allowed to admire wealth as an encouragement to his industry, the poor man was to be taught to be active but not too active in the pursuit of wealth; he could not be allowed to question his subordination.

It would be fruitless, I think, to attempt to determine the exact processes of influence and causation and the priority of changes in the attitudes discussed in this chapter. In examining moral and aesthetic theories I have intended to convey no more than a sense of the complexities of a developing climate of opinion. However, even such a

80. Dr Townson, *The Poor Man's Moralists* (Liverpool, 1798), p. ii.

81. George Chapman, *A Treatise on Education*, fifth revised edition (London, 1792), pp. 60, 62-63.

82. See pp. 184-190.

cursory survey of the relationship between the moral and the aesthetic in eighteenth-century moral philosophy helps to explain, I hope, some aspects of later criticism, as it related to representations of the rural poor in literature, that might otherwise have seemed extraordinary - the strong emphasis, for example, on a moral approach to literature, defined in terms of uniformity. There is a general expectation that values such as prudence and decency are uniformly applicable to what is seen as a common human nature uniting the middle and lower classes, a uniformity which tends to exclude the upper classes but which itself incorporates a certain degree of hierarchy.

Francis Jeffrey, probably the most influential critic of the early nineteenth century, provides a significant instance of this critical tendency. In a review of Archibald Alison's *Essays on the Nature and Principles of Taste*, reprinted in its enlarged form in *Contributions to the 'Edinburgh Review'*, Jeffrey defined beauty, following Alison, as a state of imagination in which objects were connected by association with agreeable emotions. He differed from Alison in defining a kind of beauty proper to art, that which depended on associations connected with 'the law of nature'.⁸³ By 'the law of nature' Jeffrey meant the 'great principle of sympathy with human feelings',⁸⁴ which ensured that such associations were universal and recurring. Associations that were purely individual he described as 'occasional or accidental'.⁸⁵ They might be a source of pleasure but could never qualify as artistic beauty. Like Alison, he defined the associations 'of opulence, and elegance', 'the forms and colours which distinguished the rich and noble', as accidental.⁸⁶ From the distinction between universal and accidental associations Jeffrey identified 'two tastes' -

83. Francis Jeffrey, *Contributions to the 'Edinburgh Review'*, 4 vols (London, 1844), I, p. 33. See Byron Guyer, 'Francis Jeffrey's *Essay on Beauty*', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 1 (November, 1949), 71-85 and 'The Philosophy of Francis Jeffrey', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 11, 1 (March, 1950), 17-26.

84. Jeffrey, I, p. 57.

85. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

86. *Ibid.*, p. 46.

one founded upon universal associations, according to which [those who labour for applause] finished those performances for which they challenged universal praise - and another guided by all casual and individual associations, through which they might still look fondly upon nature, and upon objects of their secret admiration.⁸⁷

The public worth of poetry therefore depended ultimately, for Jeffrey, not on the pleasure which it gave individual readers but on the universality of its beauty, manifested by 'moral and social emotions' -

Poems...are beautiful in proportion as they are conversant with beautiful objects - or as they suggest to us, in a more direct way, the moral and social emotions on which the beauty of all objects depends.⁸⁸

Jeffrey maintained an analogy between virtue and beauty by means of Hume's theory of sympathy. However, he never clearly intimated whether the operations of sympathy depended upon a natural order, similar to Shaftesbury's, or a social consensus, as Hume had argued, although he was sceptical of the actual existence of a moral sense.⁸⁹ Nevertheless, the examples which he chose in this essay to illustrate his theory suggest a conception of morality which, in its concentration on values such as industry, piety and temperance, is little different from Hume's middle-class consensus -

Take, for instance, the case of a common English landscape - green meadows with grazing and ruminating cattle - canals or navigable rivers - well fenced, well cultivated fields - neat, clean, scattered cottages, - humble antique churches, with church-yard elms, and crossing hedgerows - all seen under bright skies, and in good weather: - There is much beauty, as every one will acknowledge, in such a scene. But in what does the beauty consist? Not certainly in the mere mixture of colours and forms; for colours more pleasing, and lines more graceful (according to any theory of grace that may be preferred), might be spread upon a board, or a painter's pallet, without engaging the eye to a second glance, or raising the least emotion in the mind; - but in the picture of human happiness that is presented to our imaginations and affections, - in the visible and unequivocal signs of comfort, and cheerful and peaceful enjoyment, - and of that secure and successful industry that ensures its continuance, - and of the

87. Ibid., p. 78.

88. Ibid., p. 72.

89. Ibid., pp. 17-18.

piety by which it is exalted, - and of the simplicity by which it is contrasted with the guilt and the fever of a city life; - in the images of health and temperance and plenty which it exhibits to every eye...⁹⁰

It was this emphasis on morality, above all, that Jeffrey sought to apply in his literary criticism -

The praise...to which I aspire, and to merit which I am conscious that my efforts were most constantly directed, is, that I have, more uniformly and earnestly than any preceding critic, made the Moral tendencies of the works under consideration a leading subject of discussion...⁹¹

Developments in poetry in the eighteenth century were analogous to the movement in criticism towards a more utilitarian and less ideal morality. An ideal of Arcadian simplicity was replaced in the eighteenth century by an ideal of pious industry in images of poverty, a change which coincided with a decline in the popularity of neoclassical pastoral. The appearance of the poor in poetry always verged on paradox and related criticism often laboured with qualifications -

Tho' the Style of Pastoral is humble, it is not sordidly mean, nor slovenly careless... But is sweet, pleasant, and easy; elegant with Plainness, and but poetically low.⁹²

In the second decade of the eighteenth century, when Joseph Trapp's *Lectures on Poetry*, from which the above quotation comes, were first published, the contemporary poor often seemed too low altogether to be poetic - 'As the Condition of Shepherds is now mean and contemptible; it seems too forced a Prosopopœia to affix to them any Character of Politeness'.⁹³ How the concept of poetic lowness changed so as to incorporate the contemporary poor without forcing is the subject of the next chapter.

90. Ibid., p. 36.

91. Ibid., p. x.

92. Joseph Trapp, *Lectures on Poetry* (1742), facsimile reprint (Menston, 1973), p. 179.

93. Ibid., p. 186.

Chapter 3

Arts of Delusion: *The Deserted Village*

Lucy. And is the sweet embowered cottage belonging to
Mrs. Woodbine, where I used to read the "Dear Recess",
indeed to come down?
Oakland. Yes, it is; so you must find some other nook
to be miserable in.

William Pearce, *Netley Abbey* (1794), I, i

The Deserted Village spans a surprisingly large historical range. To Victorian readers the poem was most closely associated with the poetry of Pope.¹ Raymond Williams has recently pointed to affinities with Blake, Wordsworth and Shelley.² A poem with such disparate associations may perhaps be expected to illuminate aspects of the complex changes in attitudes to poetry and to the rural poor which took place in the eighteenth century and which contributed to the transformation of Pope's kind of poetry into Wordsworth's. Goldsmith himself offered one explanation when he suggested in his poem that poetry, as he knew it, was being made impossible by what he saw as a new and destructive mercantilism. The kind of community, united by bonds of intimacy and mutual aid, in which poetry had flourished was being destroyed by an impersonal, aggrandizing commerce. The replacement of one kind of society by another, Goldsmith argued, was being facilitated by a reversal of traditional priorities; the glory of the nation was being allowed precedence over the well-being of at least the majority of its inhabitants. Dependent upon the receptiveness of its readers and therefore a measure of society's moral health, poetry now belonged to a disappearing world.

It is possible to characterize *The Deserted Village* as an argument

1. See, for instance, David Masson, *Miscellaneous Works of Oliver Goldsmith* (1883), in *Goldsmith: The Critical Heritage*, edited by G.S. Rousseau (London, 1974), p. 355.

2. *The Country and the City*, p. 79.

because that is how Goldsmith himself introduced it in his Dedication addressed to Reynolds. There he discusses not only the hypothesis of the poem - the depopulation of the countryside owing to an increase in 'luxury' - but also the evidence with which it was formed. Anticipating opposition, Goldsmith stressed that his poem was not merely the product of his imagination but also of four or five years of 'country excursions'.³ Even poets could not, at such a crucial time, afford to be fanciful.

But, as he had feared, his readers disagreed with him. When the reviewers addressed the poem as an argument about the rural poor, they were unanimous in rejecting it as exaggerated. John Hawkesworth wrote in the *Monthly Review* that 'as a picture of fancy it has great beauty; and if we shall occasionally remark that it is nothing more, we shall very little derogate from its merit'.⁴ Recently literary critics have suggested the need for a re-appraisal of the poem, not because its argument is now believed true but because even as a fiction it is more revealing about the social conditions under which it was written than was once thought. Raymond Williams argues in *The Country and the City*⁵ that the sense of nostalgia and loss prevalent in the poetry of the later eighteenth century attained a new clarity and urgency in *The Deserted Village* under the pressure of a perceived social threat; Goldsmith placed a novel emphasis on observation of a real event in a real place, an emphasis which made the generalized antitheses of earlier poetry less plausible. John Barrell makes further claims for the poem.⁶ It presents, he thinks, in embryo, a different social order, which he describes as 'agrarian egalitarianism'.⁷ The emphasis on leisure and

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3. *The Collected Works of Oliver Goldsmith*, edited by Arthur Friedman, 5 vols (Oxford, 1966), IV, p. 285. All quotations from Goldsmith's works are from this edition. I am also indebted to Roger Lonsdale's excellent commentary on *The Deserted Village* in his edition of *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins and Oliver Goldsmith* (London, 1969), pp. 669-694.
 4. John Hawkesworth, *Monthly Review*, 42 (June, 1770), 440-445; Rousseau, p. 84.
 5. *The Country and the City*, pp. 74-79.
 6. *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 73-82.
 7. *Ibid.*, p. 81. The influence of *The Deserted Village* on radical thought is described in A.J. Sambrook, 'An Essay on Eighteenth-century Pastoral, Pope to Wordsworth' (II), *Trivium*, 6 (May, 1971), 103-115, pp. 104-105.

the praise of independence in connection with the poor, together with the fact that the village hall is never mentioned, revealed the political possibilities of pastoral to radicals of the 1790s and later. Disagreeing with Williams who argues that Goldsmith ultimately endorses 'the idealised pastoral economy'⁸ of earlier poetry, falsifying the real history by mistaking his own needs for those of the rural poor, Barrell insists that by taking the pastoral image to its extreme, presenting his villagers as independent of economic ties and never showing them at work, Goldsmith disclosed the liberating potential of pastoral as a goal and an inspiration for the poor.

It seems to me, however, that both critics, while they are right in attributing to the poem the kind of importance they do, misinterpret its literary context. I wish to suggest that its influence is not as unequivocal as Barrell implies and that its novelty is not where Williams places it. It is certainly true that the emphasis which Goldsmith placed on his researches, both in the Dedication and elsewhere,⁹ had the desired effect of drawing attention to the poem's argument. Goldsmith's success, in fact, was such that attempts have been made ever since the publication of the poem to discover the identity of Auburn. Readers have assumed, with Goldsmith's encouragement, that it is important to test the literal truth of *The Deserted Village*. Was this a novel assumption? There is nothing in the contemporary reviews to indicate that the reviewers thought it striking for a poet to claim to be literally accurate. John Hawkesworth, in fact, criticized Goldsmith for not being accurate enough. Of lines 103 and 104 ('For him no wretches, born to work and weep, / Explore the mine, or tempt the dangerous deep') he wrote, 'Does he who retires into the country... use no knife, eat no sugar, and wear neither shirt nor breeches?'.¹⁰ Hawkesworth's tone suggests that even if accuracy was not a novel claim for poetry, it was nevertheless perhaps a foolish one.

8. *The Country and the City*, p. 78.

9. See 'The Revolution in Low Life'; Friedman, III, pp. 195-198.

10. John Hawkesworth, *Monthly Review*, 42 (June, 1770), 440-445; Rousseau, p. 85.

The question of the extent to which pastoral should correspond with contemporary life had been the subject of a long and complicated debate before 1770 when *The Deserted Village* was published. It is necessary to sketch the outlines of a familiar history¹¹ in order to reveal how much Goldsmith owed to it. In the eighteenth century the debate originated with a series of essays in the *Guardian*, published in 1713 and probably written by Thomas Tickell, in which it was argued that the true pastoral poets avoided both artificiality and grossness, prized simplicity and credibility above extravagant wit, and were prepared to adapt the tradition to indigenous conditions; the line of pastoral was said to run from Theocritus through Virgil and Spenser to Ambrose Philips.¹² Pope, annoyed at being thus excluded, contributed an anonymous essay to the series which purported to demonstrate Philips's superiority to himself but which, in fact, was intended to ridicule Philips by exaggerating the homeliness of his poetry.¹³ Philips, like Tickell, thought that the contemporary shepherd's life should, within the limits of decorum, be the proper subject of pastoral. Pope's model was the Golden Age, an ideal world purged of vulgarity; its topography was to be culled from his classical predecessors.

The significance of the dispute, which owed its origins as much to pique as to conviction, should not be exaggerated. Lee Elioseff has suggested that J.E. Congleton's well-known distinction between 'neo-classical' and 'rationalistic' critics of pastoral¹⁴ ignores the fact that

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11. See J.E. Congleton, *Theories of Pastoral Poetry in England 1684-1798* (Gainesville, 1952).
 12. *The Guardian*, 2 vols (London, 1714), I, nos 22, 23, 28, 30, 32 (April, 1713) (on the question of Tickell's authorship, see John Butt, 'Notes for a Bibliography of Thomas Tickell', *Bodleian Quarterly Record*, 5, 59 (1928), 299-302, p. 302.
 13. *The Guardian*, I, no. 40 (27 April, 1713).
 14. Congleton characterizes the debate as follows -
Should [critics and writers] be guided by the great ancient critics and pastoral poets, or should they follow the natural enlightenment of reason and keep their eyes on England landscapes and English shepherds?

(p. 75)



'neo-classical' critics referred to literary precedent not as the ultimate standard of judgment but as the best means of embodying an ideal of pastoral already conceived as such by reason.¹⁵ With respect to the dispute under discussion he offers an alternative distinction between 'Tory' and 'Whig' critics, arguing that the protagonists in the debate divided roughly along party lines and that 'Tory' critics adopted a 'Tory' method of deductive reasoning, deducing rules from prior principles, such as the definition of genre, whereas 'Whig' critics argued inductively and empirically 'from the subjective response rather than from the objective work of art or genre'.¹⁶ It seems to me, however, if a third suggestion is not excessive, that early eighteenth-century critics were less concerned to differentiate between such various means to the common end of decorum as the authority of precedent and the power of reason than to incorporate them within the proper balance between the real, knowledge derived from observation of contemporary manners, and the ideal, both received and intuited knowledge.¹⁷ Decorum, in other words, was an inclusive rather than exclusive standard. The pastoral debate was, I think, primarily concerned not with the substantive constituents of decorum but with the distribution of emphases within an accepted balance.

In his *Guardian* essay no. 30, for example, Tickell is as concerned to trace the practice of Spenser and Philips to Theocritus as Pope is to associate himself with Virgil in his *Discourse on Pastoral Poetry*. Both agree that pastoral should convey a state of illusory perfection based on the tranquillity of country life and both would achieve this by a judicious combination of observed detail, omission and fantasy. According to Tickell -

15. Elioseff, pp. 125-141.

16. Ibid., p. 141. See also Samuel Kliger, 'Whig Aesthetics: A Phase of Eighteenth-century Taste', *ELH*, 16, 1 (March, 1949), 135-150. Donald Greene has argued that the common distinction between Tories, who subordinate progress to principle, and Whigs, who reverse the priorities, is largely the result of Whig propaganda (Donald J. Greene, *The Politics of Samuel Johnson* (New Haven, 1960), pp. 1-21).

17. See Emerson R. Marks, *Relativist and Absolutist: The Early Neoclassical Debate in England* (New Brunswick, 1955), pp. 35-36.

An Author, that would amuse himself by writing Pastorals, should form in his Fancy a Rural Scene of perfect Ease and Tranquillity, where Innocence, Simplicity, and Joy abound. It is not enough that he writes about the Country; he must give what is agreeable in that Scene, and hide what is wretched. It is indeed commonly affirmed, that Truth well painted will certainly please the Imagination; but it is sometimes convenient not to discover the whole Truth, but that Part which only is delightful.¹⁸

Pope recommends a similar apportioning of truth and fiction, arguing that 'nothing more conduces to make these composures natural, than when some Knowledge in rural affairs is discover'd' but adding -

We must...use some illusion to render a Pastoral delightful; and this consists in exposing the best side only of a shepherd's life, and in concealing its miseries.¹⁹

In statements such as these Pope seems no more reticent than Tickell about allowing the desired effect of pastoral to determine the poetic means. Similarly Tickell seems as determined as Pope to 'lay down...Rules'²⁰ which will govern the writing and judging of pastoral.

The differences between Pope and Tickell were, I think, more practical than theoretical. Much of Pope's essay consists not of criticism of Tickell's theories but simply of debating points; he draws attention, for example, to inconsistencies between Tickell's praise and Philips's actual poetry, such as Philips's close imitation of Virgil in one of his pastorals. Pope had previously declared himself an admirer of Philips²¹ and his satire was obscure enough for Thomas Purney, an advocate of Tickell's approach, to refer to the essay at length with unsuspecting approbation.²² Gay's *The Shepherd's Week* was similarly

18. *The Guardian*, I, no. 22, p. 130.

19. Audra and Williams, pp. 26-27.

20. *The Guardian*, I, no. 22, p. 128.

21. In a letter to Henry Cromwell written in 1710 (*The Poems of Ambrose Philips*, edited by M.G. Segar (Oxford, 1937), p. 171).

22. *The Works of Thomas Purney*, edited by H.O. White (Oxford, 1933), pp. 3-4. Purney attributed the essay to Addison. According to Johnson, Steele 'was unwilling to print the paper lest Pope should be offended' ('Life of Pope', *Lives of the English Poets*, edited by G.B. Hill, 3 vols (Oxford, 1905), III, p. 107).

intended as a burlesque of Philips and yet, notoriously, it was received by many as a model pastoral.²³ Both Pope and Philips were praised by Addison in the course of an essay castigating the use of classical myths in contemporary poetry²⁴ and Tickell himself applauded Pope for including fairies in his poetry.²⁵ The lines of battle were from the outset so confused that it was always difficult, even for the combatants, to distinguish between them. Nevertheless, they tended to divide, I think, over the extent to which description of contemporary rural life could be admitted into pastoral, the extent to which the real could bolster the ideal without challenging it. Pope, for example, criticized 'the old *English* and country phrases of *Spenser*' because they 'were either entirely obsolete, or spoken only by people of the lowest condition'.²⁶ Tickell, on the other hand, argued that shepherds in pastoral 'must be supposed so rude and uncultivated, that nothing but what is plain and unaffected can come from them'.²⁷ The dispute, I would suggest, belongs to the larger debate discussed in the previous chapter about the lower limits of decorum.

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23. Thomas Purney thought that Gay had observed 'the Manner of the Fellows and Wenches in the Country, and put down every thing that [he] observ'd them act' (*A Full Enquiry into the True Nature of Pastoral* (1717), *Augustan Reprint Society*, ser. 2, no. 4 (Ann Arbor, 1948), p. 26). According to Johnson, the poem was popular because of its 'just representations of rural manners and occupations' ('Life of Gay'; Hill, II, p. 269). Goldsmith explained that the poem was 'originally intended, I suppose, as a burlesque on those of Philips; but, perhaps without designing it, he has hit the true spirit of pastoral poetry' (*The Beauties of English Poesy* (1767); Friedman, V, p. 322). John Aikin wrote that 'while he pursues his primary design of burlesque parody, he paints rural scenes with a truth of pencil scarcely elsewhere to be met with' (*Letters to a Young Lady on a Course of English Poetry* (London, 1804), p. 58). Robert Southey, when he read the poem as a boy, did not realize that it was a burlesque (*The Poetical Works of Robert Southey*, 10 vols (London, 1837-1838), III (1838), p. 2). See also Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 54-55.
24. *The Spectator*, edited by Donald F. Bond, 5 vols (Oxford, 1965), IV, no. 523 (30 October, 1712), p. 361.
25. *The Guardian*, I, no. 30, p. 176. Tickell refers to 'January and May', 459-464.
26. Audra and Williams, p. 32.
27. *The Guardian*, I, no. 23, p. 133.

Between 1713 and 1750, when Dr Johnson addressed the topic of pastoral in two influential essays in the *Rambler*,²⁸ the subject of the debate had become obscure. On one side Johnson placed 'advocates for the golden age' and on the other writers who 'having the mean and despicable condition of a shepherd always before them, conceive it necessary to degrade the language of pastoral, by obsolete terms and rustick words'.²⁹ Johnson sought to avoid the studied elegance of the former and the equally studied earthiness of the latter by extending pastoral to 'all ranks of persons, because persons of all ranks inhabit the country'.³⁰ Pastoral could then be both natural without being vulgar and graceful without being fantastic. Johnson's solution, however, neglects the aims of the early protagonists. For them fantasy was of the essence of pastoral; according to Tickell, pastoral 'transports us into a kind of *Fairy Land*'.³¹ As John Hughes put it, in his 'Remarks on the Shepherd's Calendar' (1715),

it is a wonderful amusement to the imagination to be sometimes transported, as it were, out of modern life, and to wander in these pleasant scenes which the pastoral poets provide for us and in which we are apt to fancy ourselves reinstated for a time in our first innocence and happiness.³²

The purpose of 'the low images' which Tickell advocated was, according to Hughes, 'to deceive the reader and make him fancy himself really in such a place and among such persons as are described'.³³ What was originally in dispute was the extent to which pastoral needed to be real before the

28. No. 36 (21 July, 1750) and no. 37 (24 July, 1750). Joseph Warton included no. 37 in his *Works of Virgil* (1753) (vol. I, pp. 38-43) 'with the remark that he could find no other discussion of the pastoral "so rational, so judicious, and yet so new" (p. 37)' (*The Rambler*, edited by W.J. Bate and A.B. Strauss, 3 vols (New Haven, 1969), I, p. 200n.). William Dodd, in the preface to his *Moral Pastorals*, refers his readers particularly to these essays (*Poems* (London, 1767), p. 208).

29. Bate and Strauss, I, p. 202.

30. Ibid., p. 203.

31. *The Guardian*, I, no. 22, p. 128.

32. Elledge, I, p. 306.

33. Id.

reader would accept the fantasy. Johnson, on the other hand, had little time for make-believe, as his dismissal of *Lycidas* revealed. Attempts to mediate between 'a kind of *Fairy Land*' and the real world he refuted with impatience, referring to 'principles which, having no foundation in the nature of things, are wholly to be rejected from a species of composition in which, above all others, mere nature is to be regarded'.³⁴ What had begun as an attempt to make Arcadia more familiar to English readers was by 1750 developing into a concerted assault on Arcadia itself.

'Mere nature is to be regarded' - Johnson's essays were influential not because of his solution to the old controversy but because he cleared away its confusions with this simple prescription. Johnson's ironic elevation of 'mere nature' is at the expense, I believe, of those who regarded nature as aesthetically crude. The phrase is used by Shaftesbury, for example, in his notes for an essay entitled 'Plastics', in which he condemns 'practical and empirical' taste as 'necessarily false'.³⁵ Empirically observed nature was preferable only to 'what is apt to be commended as ingenuous [sic] and merely speculative',³⁶ by which Shaftesbury meant whatever stopped short of a revelation of order - 'Better mere nature than half-way, illaborate, artful, merely critical judgment'.³⁷ This now seemed a cavalier attitude to nature. Churchill's *The Prophecy of Famine* (1763) begins with a pastoral burlesque similar to *The Shepherd's Week* but with the opposite intention of championing 'dowdy Nature' by satirizing the unreality of pastoral based on classical models -

NYMPHS, NAIADS, NEREIDS, DRYADS, SATYRS, FAUNS,
Sport in our floods, and trip it o'er our lawns;
Flow'rs which once flourish'd fair in GREECE and ROME,
More fair revive in ENGLAND's meads to bloom;
Skies without cloud exotic suns adorn;
And roses blush, but blush without a thorn;
Landscapes, unknown to *dowdy* Nature, rise,
And new creations strike our wond'ring eyes.

(51-58)³⁸

34. Bate and Strauss, I, p. 200.

35. Rand, p. 112.

36. Ibid., p. 115.

37. Ibid., p. 116.

38. *The Poetical Works of Charles Churchill*, edited by Douglas Grant (Oxford, 1956), p. 196. All quotations from Churchill's poetry are from this edition.

Arcadian pastoralists, motivated by 'OSTENTATION' and '*letter'd* PRIDE' (39-40), sought to out-do God's creation.

As M.H. Abrams has pointed out, analogies between the poet and God in eighteenth-century critical theory were intended to justify non-realistic poetry.³⁹ Churchill's parody of 'new creations' is therefore part of a critical debate between advocates of a more empirically based poetry and those who continued the tradition of poetic fantasy, such as the proponents of the sublime. The trend towards more realistic pastoral was accelerated by factors more complex than Johnson's attempt to alter the balance between nature and art. The causes of literary change are as uncertain as those of literary creation but what may perhaps be asserted, with some degree of confidence, is that poets, of whom Shenstone and later Gray were the most influential, became less willing to accept London as the cultural hub of England and were consequently dissatisfied with a genre which depicted the alternatives in terms of fantasy.⁴⁰ Others, such as Dyer, celebrated the new towns of Manchester, Sheffield and Birmingham as embodiments of an industriousness unknown to London's idle rich. In order to present other ways of life as social and moral alternatives to a readership still largely unfamiliar with them it was necessary for the poet to become a recorder and proselytiser. William Dodd, for instance, introduces his significantly-named *Moral Pastorals*, written between 1762 and 1763, as follows - 'I formed my plans, as much from nature and real characters as I could: and several incidents in rural life helped me, during my stay in the island of THANET.'⁴¹ The strategy - encouraging the reader to accept the truth of the poems by claiming that they are based on real people and real events in a real place - closely resembles Goldsmith's. It produced a kind of poetry that was new in pastoral -

39. Abrams, pp. 275-282.

40. Professor Congleton suggests that Salomon Gessner, the most popular contemporary pastoral poet of the second half of the eighteenth century, also contributed to the trends towards observed detail (pp. 121-126). The popularity of Gessner, a Swiss poet, may perhaps have been associated with this dissatisfaction with London.

41. Dodd, p. 209. All quotations from Dodd's poetry are from this edition.

Where SARUM's verdant plain extends around,
 Like the vast world of waters, without bound;
 A turf-built cot, see! THENOT's labour form,
 To guard from summer's sun, and winter's storm...
 (Pastoral the First, 1-4)

The direction to the reader ('A turf-built cot, see!') is so arranged that it becomes a command rather than an invitation; the poet, we are told to believe, is not creating the scene of his poem and inviting the reader's participation in illusion but watching, with the reader co-opted as witness, the building of a cottage in a well-known setting. Our scepticism is under pressure from the outset.

The approach is, in fact, familiar; it was borrowed from genres already well-established in English poetry - topographical poetry and the georgic. The georgic concentrated on precisely that area of rural life omitted from the pastoral - the lowly labours of the husbandman. The georgic poet posited a novel relationship between himself and his reader, pretending to give advice, illustrated in meticulous detail, to a farmer on the business of farming. It was never clear why the reader should be expected to welcome in one genre what he was supposed to find so repugnant in another, even given the elaborate Miltonic diction which was intended to elevate the subject. Indeed Addison thought that paradox was of the essence of the georgic. We admire, he suggested, the improbable transformation of material which, outside poetry, we should find repulsive. When reading Virgil's *Georgics*, as 'he breaks the clods and tosses the dung about with an air of gracefulness',⁴² we 'find our imaginations more affected by his descriptions than they would have been by the very sight of what he describes'.⁴³ However, if the reader were transported by the georgic, it was not to the fairy-land of pastoral; the poet attempted to make his subject as real as possible and continually invoked the reader, in the guise of farmer, in a manner similar to Dodd's pastoral. And since the poem was presented in the form of instruction and not as a work of imagination, it encouraged the kind of attention - sceptical deliberation, concentration on detail -

42. Joseph Addison, 'An Essay on Virgil's *Georgics*' (1697); Elledge, I, p. 6.

43. Ibid., p. 5.

which would have been inappropriate for early eighteenth-century pastoral. At the same time too much attention to detail was discouraged, a conflict in intention evident in the following passage from John Philips's popular georgic, *Cyder* (1708) -

Farmer, look, where full-ear'd Sheaves of Rye
Grow wavy on the Tith, that Soil select
For Apples; thence thy Industry shall gain
Ten-fold Reward; thy Garners, thence with Store
Surcharg'd, shall burst; thy Press with purest Juice
Shall flow, which, in revolving Years, may try
Thy feeble Feet, and bind thy Fault'ring Tongue.
Such is the *Kentchurch*, such *Dantzeyan* Ground,
Such thine, O learned *Brome*, and *Capel* such,
Willisian Burlton, much-lov'd *Geers* his *Marsh*,
And *Sutton-Acres*, drench'd with Regal Blood
Of *Ethelbert*, when to th' unhallow'd Feast
Of *Mercian Offa* he invited came,
To treat of Spousals: Long connubial Joys
He promis'd to himself, allur'd by Fair
Elfrida's Beauty; but deluded dy'd
In height of Hopes - Oh! hardest Fate, to fall
By Shew of Friendship, and pretended Love!
(I, 60-77)⁴⁴

This passage indicates how the contradiction in Virgil's *Georgics* between the imagery of the struggling farmer and that of bountiful Nature⁴⁵ was resolved in the conventional eighteenth-century georgic - plenty ('thy Garners...shall burst') was Nature's reward to Industry. However, as Addison had warned, 'the inculcating precept upon precept will at length prove tiresome to the reader if he meets with no entertainment'.⁴⁶ Therefore Philips concludes his list of places with an historical episode similar to those which appear in Virgil's *Georgics* and which, as one critic has put it, enact a 'tense interplay of georgic and historical, continuity and change'.⁴⁷ Philips's episode, however, is a lurid story

44. *The Poems of John Philips*, edited by M.G. Lloyd Thomas (Oxford, 1927), p. 46.

45. See L.P. Wilkinson, *The 'Georgics' of Virgil: A Critical Survey* (Cambridge, 1969), pp. 143-145.

46. Elledge, I, p. 3.

47. Michael C.J. Putnam, *Virgil's Poem of the Earth: Studies in the 'Georgics'* (Princeton, 1979), p. 77.

of treachery and murder, an irrelevant climax apparently intended merely to revive the reader's flagging interest. The English georgic combined a celebration of industry with a distaste for the mundane details of work. If the blank verse was supposed to mediate between the celebratory intention and the distasteful fact, nevertheless its yoking together was often violent and to minds less tolerant of paradox than Addison's, the effect was bound to be disagreeable. Thus Dr Johnson wrote of a later georgic, Dyer's *The Fleece* (1757) -

The woolcomber and the poet appear to me such discordant natures, that an attempt to bring them together is to 'couple the serpent with the fowl'. When Dyer, whose mind was not unpoetical, has done his utmost, by interesting his reader in our native commodity, by interspersing rural imagery, and incidental digressions, by cloathing small images in great words, and by all the writer's arts of delusion, the meanness naturally adhering, and the irreverence habitually annexed to trade and manufacture, sink him under insuperable oppression; and the disgust which blank verse, encumbering and encumbered, superadds to an unpleasing subject, soon repels the reader, however willing to be pleased.⁴⁸

Christopher Smart mocked the genre in a gentler and less prejudiced way, in the course of his own georgic, *The Hop-Garden* (1752) -

Thou hast begun auspicious, if the soil
(As sung before) be loamy; this the hop
Loves above others, this is rich, is deep,
Is viscous, and tenacious of the pole.
Yet maugre all its native worth, it may
Be meliorated with warm compost. See!
Yon craggy mountain, whose fastidious head
Divides the star-set hemisphere above,
And Cantium's plains beneath...
(I, 72-80)⁴⁹

The exclamation ('See!') is so abrupt, the ambiguity so apparent and the juxtaposition so incongruous that the reader's attentiveness to the details of soil preparation suddenly appears absurd. And yet the 'fastidious' mountain mimics the reader's instinctive withdrawal. Smart, with typical ingenuity, uses another genre, topographical poetry with its dramatic landscapes, both to criticize the commonness of his own and to repudiate the reader's 'fastidious' concurrence.

48. 'Life of Dyer'; Hill, III, pp. 345-346.

49. *The Collected Poems of Christopher Smart*, edited by Norman Callan (London, 1949), pp. 144-145. All quotations from *The Hop-Garden* are from this edition.

Smart's comic amalgamation of genres recalls an earlier and more celebrated cross-fertilization. Undoubtedly the poet most influential in creating a taste for closely observed detail was the eclectic James Thomson. 'Thomson was one of the first of our poets who ventured upon minute and circumstantial description', wrote John Aikin.⁵⁰ William Cowper, responding to a request from the Reverend William Unwin for advice on his son's education, wrote that 'Thomson's *Seasons* might afford him some useful lessons. At least they would have a tendency to give his mind an observing and philosophical turn.'⁵¹ Thomson tried to embrace both observation and philosophy, abstraction and specificity, description and imitation. His borrowing from various genres in search of an accuracy that was also poetic helped further to relax the grip of classical precedent on rural poetry. It is true that, as John Barrell argues, Thomson's poetry is not 'part of a conscious attempt to localise landscape'⁵² but if his landscapes remain general, organized according to an idea of nature derived, Barrell suggests, from Claude,⁵³ their basis is a direct confrontation with nature. Part of the peculiar energy of his poetry stems from his effort to convey an observed scene by means of inadequate conventions. The ensuing contradictions, instead of muffling the effect, often sharpen it by distinguishing the real from the conventional. In the following passage, for instance, Thomson's effort to transmute an unmediated perception of a landscape into an ordered structure is laid unusually bare by an awkward transition -

Rent is the fleecy mantle of the sky;
The clouds fly different; and the sudden sun
By fits effulgent gilds the illumined field,
And black by fits the shadows sweep along -

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50. *Letters to a Young Lady on a Course of English Poetry*, p. 169. See Scott Elledge, 'The Background and Development in English Criticism of the Theories of Generality and Particularity', *PMLA*, 42, 1 (March, 1947), 147-182.
51. *The Correspondence of William Cowper*, edited by Thomas Wright, 4 vols (London, 1904), I, p. 431.
52. John Barrell, *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place 1730-1840* (Cambridge, 1972), p. 36.
53. *Ibid.*, pp. 13-20.

A gaily chequered, heart-expanding view,
 Far as the circling eye can shoot around,
 Unbounded tossings in a flood of corn.
 (Autumn, 36-42)⁵⁴

The scene is violent and turbulent, the sudden contrasts of light and dark irregular, 'fitful'. Thomson's description, 'gaily chequered', with its suggestion of a bright, stable and harmonious pattern, is hardly adequate. More convincing is the extremity of his efforts to contain what he sees and the inflation of the poetic diction, punctured by the simple force of 'rent', 'sudden', 'fits', 'sweep', conveys that extremity precisely. The real landscape is present in the verse and resists absorption into Thomson's idea of sublime harmony.

The Deserted Village is, I think, best seen in this context. Goldsmith's emphasis on observation is not, I suggest, novel but part of a growing tendency in pastoral, encouraged by developments outside the genre, towards a realistic presentation of an observed subject.⁵⁵ Pastoral poets began to rely on sources which seemed to embody the proper emphasis on Nature - Spenser, Thomson, the georgic - and, using strategies culled from these sources, attempted to disguise their art by adopting the

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54. James Thomson, *'The Seasons' and 'The Castle of Indolence'*, edited by James Sambrook (Oxford, 1972), p. 90. All quotations from Thomson's poetry are from this edition.
55. The increasing importance of description as observation in late eighteenth-century rhetoric is examined by Gerald A. Hauser in 'Empiricism, Description, and the New Rhetoric', *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 5, 1 (Winter, 1972), 24-44. The realistic aspect of *The Deserted Village* leads Leo Storm to argue that it belongs to the georgic rather than the pastoral genre because 'the pastoral celebrates the idyllic and it is mainly artificial or idealized' whereas the georgic 'more realistically describes the peasant's life as one of virtually unremitting toil' ('Literary Convention in Goldsmith's *Deserted Village*', *Huntington Library Quarterly*, 33, 3 (May, 1970), 243-256, p. 246). However, Storm's distinction ignores the history of pastoral in the eighteenth century; as I have tried to demonstrate, pastoral began to encroach on areas normally reserved for the georgic. The genres were never clearly distinguished and differences became even less obvious as Johnson's definition of pastoral - 'a poem in which any action or passion is represented by its effects upon a country life' (*The Rambler*, no. 37; Bate and Strauss, I, p. 201) - gained general acceptance. In any case, *The Deserted Village* lacks the pedagogic element which was an essential part of the eighteenth-century georgic.

persona of observer. These strategies Johnson described as 'arts of delusion' in his 'Life of Dyer' because their deceit was greater than the willingly embraced illusion of pastoral fantasy.⁵⁶ The poet presented himself as the guide to a recorded reality rather than the maker of fiction and attempted to make both credible and acceptable to the reader that which would have otherwise been shunned. The change also involved, as I have indicated, a reversal in the accepted balance between city and country. Earlier in the century traditional praise of the country as healthy, wholesome and innocent and traditional condemnation of the city as vicious, filthy and corrupt had been mouthed but real allegiances were never in doubt. Aaron Hill's 'Dialogues between Damon and Philemon, concerning the preference of a town life to a country life, and riches to poverty',⁵⁷ were orthodox in their reversal of orthodoxy. This may have its roots in the ultimate turning back to the great world which, according to Eleanor Leach, is a significant aspect of Virgil's *Eclogues*.⁵⁸ Certainly it was an important trope in early eighteenth-century poetry, as the conclusion to Gay's *Rural Sports* attests -

Farewel. - The city calls me from your bow'rs:
Farewel amusing thoughts and peaceful hours.
(442-443)⁵⁹

Pope's retirement poetry, as Maynard Mack has skilfully demonstrated, compared not the city and the country but the city and the garden, less

56. Johnson in his *Dictionary* illustrates 'delusion' with the following quotation from Milton -

Who therefore seeks in these
True wisdom, finds her not, or by *delusion*,
Far worse, her false resemblance only meets. -

and 'illusion' with the following quotation from Pope -

To dream once more I close my willing eyes;
Ye soft *illusions*, dear deceits, arise!

57. *The Works of Aaron Hill*, 4 vols (London, 1753), III, pp. 270-292.

58. Eleanor Winsor Leach, *Virgil's 'Eclogues': Landscapes of Experience* (Ithaca, New York, 1974), pp. 25-50.

59. *John Gay: Poetry and Prose*, edited by Vinton A. Dearing and Charles E. Beckwith, 2 vols (Oxford, 1974), I, p. 58. All quotations from Gay's poetry are from this edition.

an alternative than a purified version of the city.⁶⁰ The country was seen as a negative version of the city, lacking its vices but lacking its interest also. The attitude is clearly expressed by Johnson -

The state of a man confined to the employments and pleasures of the country, is so little diversified, and exposed to so few of those accidents which produce perplexities, terrors and surprises, in more complicated transactions, that he can be shewn but seldom in such circumstances as attract curiosity.⁶¹

However, the praise and the condemnation had already, by Johnson's time, become more earnest. Pastoral fantasy could also be social criticism when the fantasy was presented as a past reality. Ramsay, for example, set his play, *The Gentle Shepherd*, in the period just after the restoration of Charles II because a contemporary setting would have been too implausible -

Unpunish'd Violence lords it over the Plains,
And *Happiness* forsakes the guilty Swains.
(Dedication to the Countess of Eglintoun, 73-74)⁶²

As it came to seem that the effort towards developing a more indigenous pastoral was being thwarted by the disjunction between the ideal and the real, the poetry became more didactic in an attempt to bring the reality closer to the ideal. Pastoral became a moral and social standard.

Thomson, for instance, castigates those 'who live / In luxury and ease, in pomp and pride', declaring them to be 'insect-tribes' (*Spring*, 52-53), and asks -

is there not some patriot in whose power
That best, that godlike luxury is placed,
Of blessing thousands, thousands yet unborn,
Through late posterity? some, large of soul,
To cheer dejected Industry, to give
A double harvest to the pining swain,
And teach the labouring hand the sweets of toil?
(*Autumn*, 910-916)

60. Maynard Mack, *The Garden and the City: Retirement and Politics in the Later Poetry of Pope 1731-1743* (London, 1969).

61. *The Rambler*, no. 36; Bate and Strauss, I, p. 198.

62. *The Works of Allan Ramsay*, vols 1 and 2, edited by Burns Martin and John W. Oliver; vols 3-6, edited by Alexander M. Kinghorn and Alexander Law (Edinburgh, 1951-1974), II (1953), p. 209. All quotations from Ramsay's poetry are from this edition.

It became common to exhort the labourer to adopt those virtues which he had previously been assumed to possess naturally -

the GOD, whose ways
Are wise and wondrous, by strange means can raise:
Bear but an honest heart, and do thy best,
And to the sovereign shepherd leave the rest!
I too could wish, perchance, and make complaint;
--- But there's no jewel, COLIN, like content.

(William Dodd, *Moral Pastorals*, Pastoral the First, 152-157)

This process was accompanied by a sceptical examination of the implications of convention. Smart, for example, alters the traditional distinction between the countryman, who is compensated for his poverty with health and an uncomplicated life, and the citizen, who pays for his wealth and sophistication with ennui and moral degeneracy, in order to expose its complacent insincerity. With the most refined wit, in a most subtle parody, he praises the crudity of rural life, lauding its natural diseases in such a way as to remind the poor that their function ('invaluable gems') is to provide the wealth which they are fortunate enough to lack -

Hail heroes, hail invaluable gems,
Splendidly rough within your native mines,
To luxury unrefined, better far
To shake with unbought agues in your weald,
Than dwell a slave to passion and to wealth,
Politely paralytic in the town.

(*The Hop-Garden*, I, 152-157)

The conventional advantages of the country, Smart implies, are as dubious as the sordid refinements of the city.

Gradually the conventional distinctions between city and country became less important than the moral standards used to evaluate them. Dyer, for instance, celebrates a process of industrialization that is actually transforming the country into the city -

Industry,
Which dignifies the artist, lifts the swain,
And the straw cottage to a palace turns,
Over the work presides...
So appear
Th' increasing walls of busy Manchester,
Sheffield and Birmingham, whose redd'ning fields
Rise and enlarge their suburbs.

(*The Fleece*, III, 332-335, 337-340)⁶³

63. John Dyer, *Poems* (1761), facsimile reprint (Menston, 1971), pp. 138-139. All quotations from *The Fleece* are from this edition.

In this way the moral distinctions were abstracted from their traditional settings. Dyer reserves his condemnation for those who, irrespective of place, oppose his doctrine of 'use'; in terms which anticipate Goldsmith he refers to

(Ye worms of pride) for your repast alone,
 Who claim all Nature's stores, woods, waters, meads,
 All her profusion; whose vile hands would grasp
 The peasant's scantling, the weak widow's mite,
 And in the sepulchre of self entomb
 Whate'er ye can, whate'er ye cannot use.
 (II, 475-480)

Dyer's philosophy is not Goldsmith's, of course; Goldsmith opposes to luxury not industry but self-sufficiency. Yet, like Dyer, Goldsmith is not concerned with conventional distinctions between country and city; he assumes them to be obvious and dismisses the city in a short passage with heavy irony (309-336). It is for this reason, I suggest, that Auburn is, as John Barrell has pointed out, so conspicuously free of the outward signs of economic dependence. Pastoral distinctions had become polarized into oppositions of moral absolutes which retained only the most perfunctory connection with the social reciprocities of earlier poetry. Auburn is the perfect society in miniature, representing all virtue; wealth and the city represent all vice. The traditional pastoral hierarchy is present in the poem but is isolated from the economic framework that would have connected Auburn to the wider society. The villagers gather round the priest and schoolmaster in the same attitude of submissive awe with which, in earlier poems, they gathered round the squire.

Goldsmith described a community of farmers similar to Auburn in 'The Revolution in Low Life', an essay he contributed to *Lloyd's Evening Post* in June, 1762 -

Though strangers to opulence, they were unacquainted with distress; few of them were known either to acquire a fortune or to die in indigence...[T]hey kept up the stated days of festivity with the strictest observance. They were merry at Christmas and mournful in Lent, got drunk on St. George's-day, and religiously cracked nuts on Michaelmas-eve.⁶⁴

The Reverend Charles Primrose describes his new village in almost identical

64. Friedman, III, p. 195.

terms in *The Vicar of Wakefield*, published in 1766 -

The place of our retreat was in a little neighbourhood, consisting of farmers, who tilled their own grounds, and were equal strangers to opulence and poverty...They wrought with chearfulness on days of labour; but observed festivals as intervals of idleness and pleasure. They kept up the Christmas carol, sent true love-knots on Valentine morning, eat pancakes on Shrove-tide, shewed their wit on the first of April, and religiously cracked nuts on Michaelmas eve.⁶⁵

The tendency of this kind of pastoral is not, I think, to devise new ideals of social organization but to emphasize the moral significance of the old ideals. How far Dr Primrose is from 'agrarian egalitarianism', for example, may be discerned from a speech he later makes, in which he argues that in a perfectly equal society the strong and cunning are bound to take advantage of the weak and innocent and that the controlled inequalities of a monarchy are preferable to such tyranny.⁶⁶ Goldsmith expressed the same views in *The Traveller*, published in 1764 -

just experience tells in every soil,
That those who think must govern those that toil,
And all that freedom's highest aims can reach,
Is but to lay proportion'd loads on each.
Hence, should one order disproportion'd grow,
Its double weight must ruin all below.
(371-376)⁶⁷

Dr Barrell bases his argument for the 'radicalization' of pastoral in *The Deserted Village* largely on the following passage -

A time there was, ere England's griefs began,
When every rood of ground maintained its man;
For him light labour spread her wholesome store,
Just gave what life required, but gave no more.
(57-60)

65. Ibid., IV, pp. 31-32.

66. Ibid., pp. 97-103. See also George Primrose -
I found that monarchy was the best government for the poor to live in, and commonwealths for the rich. I found that riches in general were in every country another name for freedom; and that no man is so fond of liberty himself as not to be desirous of subjecting the will of some individuals in society to his own.
(*The Vicar of Wakefield*; ibid., p. 121)

67. Boswell records in his journal for 30 April, 1773 that Goldsmith once said to Burke, 'I'm for Monarchy to keep us equal.' (Quoted in Ricardo Quintana, *Oliver Goldsmith* (London, 1969), p. 189).

Out of context this could well refer to an egalitarian society. But it could also refer to the balanced and self-sufficient monarchy that Goldsmith describes everywhere else in his work. As it stands, without elaboration, however, it represents neither.⁶⁸ Moreover, quite apart from the fact that the passage is obviously untrue and therefore unconvincing (one reviewer wrote beside his quotation of it simply '[*Quere*]'),⁶⁹ its reference to 'light labour', which Barrell regards as potentially controversial, is not related to the rest of the poem. Goldsmith laments the passing of the alehouse, for example, as follows -

Obscure it sinks, nor shall it more impart
An hour's importance to the poor man's heart;
Thither no more the peasant shall repair
To sweet oblivion of his daily care...

(239-242)

There is a rare compassion in that description, a compelling insight into the weight of poverty and its effect on a man's sense of dignity. And yet Goldsmith is reminiscing about Auburn's heyday; even then the alehouse provided merely a brief and illusory respite from daily humiliation. A recognition of the difficulty of labour is implicit in

68. This imagery could embrace a variety of political stances. For example, Richard Price saw in America

an independent and hardy YEOMANRY, all nearly on a level - trained to arms, - instructed in their rights - cloathed in home-spun - of simple manners - strangers to luxury - drawing plenty from the ground - and that plenty, gathered easily by the hand of industry...the rich and poor, the haughty grandee and the creeping sycophant, equally unknown - protected by laws, which (being their own will) cannot oppress...

(Richard Price, *Observations on the Importance of the American Revolution* (London, 1784), p. 69).

What separates Price from Goldsmith is his praise of the Americans for doing without kings (p. 72).

69. Unsigned review, *Critical Review*, 29 (June, 1770), 435-443; Rousseau, p. 76.

this passage⁷⁰ and also in the description of the games on the common - 'sports like these, / With sweet succession, taught even toil to please' (31-32). In these passages Goldsmith's villagers do not seem to me to bear much resemblance to Barrell's 'lazy rustics'.⁷¹

Goldsmith's reference to 'light labour' seems to be, as Raymond Williams describes it, an 'occasional gesture',⁷² with little connection with the rest of the poem. The 'egalitarianism' of *The Deserted Village* is not, I think, clearly distinguishable from the 'hierarchical egalitarianism' which Barrell denigrates in the georgic.⁷³

Moreover, if we consider again lines 239-240, we notice a significant ambiguity. We are invited to see into the poor man's heart, to feel the temporary sense of importance that his ale gives him. Yet the passage implies a judgment as well; we are expected to assume the man's insignificance. 'An hour's importance' is the man's sense of himself, which the sophisticated reader is asked to feel, and it is also the judgment we are invited to make. This awkward combination of unusual humility and conventional condescension is typical of the poem. Goldsmith can at one point write -

I still had hopes, for pride attends us still,
Amidst the swains to shew my book-learned skill...
(89-90)

and at another -

70. Hazlitt quotes line 240 in illustration of the following passage in *A Reply to Malthus's Essay on Population* -

If what [the poor] earn beyond their immediate necessities goes to the ale-house, it is because the severe labour they undergo requires some relaxation, because they are willing to forget the *work-house*, their old age, and the prospect of their wives and children starving, and to drown care in a mug of ale, in noise, and mirth, and laughter, and old ditties, and coarse jokes, and hot disputes; and in that sense of short-lived comfort, independence and good-fellowship, which is necessary to relieve the hurt mind and jaded body.

(*The Collected Works of William Hazlitt*, edited by P.P. Howe, 21 vols (London, 1930-1934), I (1930), p. 338).

71. *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 73.

72. *The Country and the City*, p. 75.

73. *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 37-38.

The service past, around the pious man,
 With steady zeal each honest rustic ran...
 (181-182)

The variety of ways in which the influence of *The Deserted Village* manifested itself confirms this impression of the poem's ambivalence. I have listed thirty poems published between 1770 and 1835 sufficiently close to it in theme and structure to be described as imitations⁷⁴ and there are probably more. There are certainly many other poems which reveal a substantial, though less extensive, influence. Thomas Batchelor included in his poem, *The Progress of Agriculture*, a section entitled 'The Peasant's Complaint', closely modelled on *The Deserted Village*, in which he criticized the consolidation of farms and the replacement of arable land by pasture.⁷⁵ The poem as a whole, however, as the title suggests, praises agricultural improvement, including the enclosure of commons. Yet *The Deserted Village* was condemned by Thomas Comber in 1770 as a poem opposed to the very kind of improvement that Batchelor advocates.⁷⁶ Radicals such as Cobbett and Spence quoted from the poem and Thomas Holcroft, who was indicted for high treason in 1794, imitated it and yet William Golden modelled on it his poem, *The Distress'd Village*, in order to attack incendiarism. *The Deserted Village* appealed to conflicting political attitudes, radical and conservative.

Moreover, the specific use to which the poem was put by Cobbett and Spence does not indicate that it was any different from many other eighteenth-century poems about the poor. Cobbett quoted from it to introduce two articles in his *Political Register* (7 November and 5 December, 1807) attacking overseas trade. Spence included a large extract (lines 35-336), retitled 'A Lamentation For the Oppressed', in *Pigs' Meat*.⁷⁷ He also reproduced an extract from William Roberts's

74. See Appendix A.

75. Thomas Batchelor, *Village Scenes* (London, 1804), pp. 88-96.

76. Thomas Comber, *A Free and Candid Correspondence on 'The Farmer's Letters to the People of England'* (London, 1770), pp. 95-107.

77. Thomas Spence, *Pigs' Meat; or, Lessons for the Swinish Multitude*, 3 vols (London, 1793-1795), I (1793), pp. 33-36.

'The Poor Man's Prayer', retitled 'The Peasant's Lamentation on the Exportation of Corn', which similarly attacked trade,⁷⁸ and Thomas Moss's popular poem, 'The Beggar's Petition'.⁷⁹ The poems have only their concern for the poor in common, both were widely read outside radical circles and many others would have fitted as well into either context.⁸⁰

Many attempts were made to explain the popularity of *The Deserted Village*. One reviewer thought that it provided an easy model for would-be

78. Ibid., III (1795), pp. 259-261. It was also printed in *Bell's Classical Arrangement of Fugitive Poetry*, 18 vols (London, 1789-1797), IX (1789), pp. 60-64 and in *Poetry, Original and Selected*, 4 vols (Glasgow, [1796-1799]), III [1797?].

79. *Pigs' Meat*, III (1795), pp. 194-195. 'The Beggar's Petition' was widely anthologized; it was printed in, for example, the *Universal Magazine*, 46 (April, 1770), 210, *Bell's Classical Arrangement of Fugitive Poetry*, IX (1789), pp. 65-67, and Vicesimus Knox, *Elegant Extracts* (*Elegant Extracts* was described by Wordsworth as 'the poetical library of our schools', *Essays upon Epitaphs* III, *The Prose Works of William Wordsworth*, edited by W.J.B. Owen and Jane W. Smyser, 3 vols (Oxford, 1974), II, p. 84). The poem was also printed in a chapbook entitled *The History of Whittington* (Newcastle, ?). A parody was published in the *European Magazine*, 46 (September, 1804), 214-215 under the title of 'The Goose-Petition'.

By 1790 'The Beggar's Petition' had 'found its way into almost every collection which [had] been made for several years past' (Salopiensis, Letter to the Editor, *Gentleman's Magazine*, 70, 2 (November, 1790), 971-972). One correspondent to the *Gentleman's Magazine* requested that 'The Poor Man's Prayer' and 'The Beggar's Petition' be printed in the magazine because they had been 'mistaken the one for the other' (Candidus, Letter to the Editor, *Gentleman's Magazine*, 61, 2 (September, 1791), 809-810); the poems were printed in the same issue (pp. 852-853). 'The Beggar's Petition' remained sufficiently famous for Dickens to refer to it in passing in *Nicholas Nickleby* (Charles Dickens, *The Life and Adventures of Nicholas Nickleby* (Oxford, 1950), p. 32).

A dispute was conducted in the pages of the *Gentleman's Magazine* over the authorship of the poem. One correspondent claimed that the author was Dr Joshua Webster (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 69, 2 (December, 1799), 1014). 'Salopiensis' first declared that he was the Rev. Thomas Moss; the rest of the correspondence confirms this attribution (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 70, 1 (January, 1800), 40-41; 79, 2 (August, 1809), 726-727, (October, 1809), 912-913, (Supplement, 1809), 1187). In the selection of poetry published in Glasgow (see n. 78) the poem was attributed to a 'Doctor Percival' (II, [1797]).

80. Thomas Knox suggests that the function of the literary extracts in *Pigs' Meat* 'was to legitimate, not to inspire' (Thomas Knox, 'Thomas Spence: The Trumpet of Jubilee', *Past & Present*, 76 (August, 1977), 75-98, p. 79n.).

poets to cut their teeth on ('since the publication of Goldsmith's delightful poem, the depopulation of villages has been a common theme for poets in their apprenticeship') or, as in the case of the poet under review, to swallow whole ('there are some striking images in Mr. Holloway's performance, for there are several that are copied very accurately from "the Deserted Village"').⁸¹ A correspondent to the *Literary Chronicle* in 1821 complained similarly - 'How many "Deserted Villages" have been attempted since Goldsmith's career, yet unsuccessfully'.⁸² A poet with the *nom de plume* of 'Hugo' provided another explanation equally shrewd -

[I]ts vogue was prodigious; less perhaps on account of the beauty of the poetry, than because it chimed in so perfectly with the querulous disposition of the people of England, always deriving an unaccountable sort of comfort from complaint.⁸³

There are, I think, other reasons more charitable to Goldsmith and his followers. The most obvious is that *The Deserted Village* provided an excellent model for poems of social analysis, even though Goldsmith's particular diagnosis was unconvincing, because its popularity encouraged the hope of a wide audience for its imitators. John Robinson in *The Oppress'd Village* (1771) concentrated on the aggregation of farms by large landholders as the chief specific cause of rural misery; many of Goldsmith's imitators would argue similarly. In this way, it should be noted, the focus of the original poem was narrowed, since aggregation affected the small farmer more than the cottager. Others used the framework of the poem to attack industrialization (Hannah Cowley) or the enclosure of commons and the French wars (Davenport) or, as we have seen, incendiaries (Golden). *The Deserted Village* as a model could accommodate a wide range of political stances.

As a mode of debate, however, poetry has its limitations. On the question of amalgamating small farms, for example, it was not the poets

81. Unsigned review of William Holloway's *The Peasant's Fate* (London, 1802), *Monthly Review*, 40 (January, 1803), 97-98, p. 98.

82. Mus., letter to the *Literary Chronicle*, 127 (21 October, 1821), 665-666, in *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Mark Storey (London, 1973), p. 148.

83. *Hugo's Cordial Drops for the Country* (London, 1828), p. [i]. The poem was printed but never published; a copy is in the British Library.

who weighed the benefits of a smaller outlay for repairs, more efficient collection of rent, greater control over the land and larger scope for improvement against an increase in contributions to the poor-rate owing to small farmers being reduced to day-labourers only intermittently employed. Pragmatic appeals to self-interest were beyond them. Their solutions could never be more specific than moral exhortation and so their poetry was always vulnerable to reasoned argument which appealed to fact -

By augmenting the size of farms, repairs are saved, and rent is in general better paid. Whether the practice is so injurious to the community, as has been supposed, is a point not easy to determine.⁸⁴

But what they could do was to direct attention to areas of concern, acting as the collective conscience of the pamphleteers; the above remark, for instance, by John Scott formed part of an essay on *The Deserted Village*. More importantly, they could fix an image in the mind which remained a powerful source of moral energy, an image which continued to seem valid in different social contexts for different social problems. The generality of poetry is also a strength therefore, as Aristotle knew; poems continue to convince when the pamphlets have been forgotten. *The Deserted Village* provided an image of oppression which seemed, even apart from its particular context, concrete and permanent. Its influence is discernible in the following passage from the *London Magazine*, in which discussions of luxury and the distresses of the poor were fairly frequent between 1772 and 1774 -

The habitations of the peasantry are daily destroyed, and the boundaries of those small spots which they used to possess, are, by the relentless landlords, swept away. Let me then ask what is become of their inhabitants accustomed to the employments of agriculture, by them alone they can gain a subsistence. Thus circumstanced what can they do? they must either fly to some more hospitable clime, or else they must become the mere labourers of those very fields where they themselves were wont to enjoy.⁸⁵

84. John Scott, *Critical Essays on Some of the Poems of Several English Poets* (1785); Rousseau, p. 103n.

85. Publicus, 'Observations on and Remedies for The Distresses of the lower Classes among the People', *London Magazine*, 43 (December, 1774), 228-230, p. 228.

Reference was actually made to both Goldsmith's and Robinson's poems in a letter to the editor of the *London Magazine* in October, 1772 -

A *deserted village* and an *oppressed village* are not the fictions of poets, though the author of that sweet descriptive poem under the former title, sometimes gives too free a rein to fancy, in the circumstances he selects as proofs of it; but there is not a circumstance mentioned in the latter poem, which is not strictly true.⁸⁶

Goldsmith disposed his reader to believe and once Robinson had provided an argument which made the belief plausible,⁸⁷ society for many began to take on the shape of *The Deserted Village*.⁸⁸

This process of assimilation was facilitated by the fact that Goldsmith's strategy of social change did not threaten the familiar pastoral hierarchy. His villagers are passive victims. He concentrates on an appeal to the good will of the politicians and, in his prediction of the country's future when deprived of its sturdy base, to a sense of nationalism. Robinson, on the other hand, leaves his predictions vague -

shall they yield, all hope of comfort lost,
To vile dependance, at the public cost?
(117-118)⁸⁹

The question implicitly challenges the stereotype of the poor who, in the patriarchal society of pastoral, are always represented as helplessly dependent on the benevolence of their superiors. Discontent usually results in conventional eighteenth-century pastoral when either party fails to abide by the role prescribed and the poet's function is then to reprimand the lord for his irresponsibility and to remind the swain of his inferiority -

86. S.C., letter to the editor, *London Magazine*, 41 (October, 1772), 479-481, p. 481.

87. See Appendix B.

88. Some historians now believe that amalgamation of farms occurred on a large scale earlier in the century and that the number of small farmers actually increased between 1780 and 1832 (J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880* (London, 1966), pp. 88-96; G.E. Mingay, *Enclosure and the Small Farmer in the Age of the Industrial Revolution* (London, 1968), passim). Yet poems modelled on *The Deserted Village* continued to be written against this kind of engrossing until at least 1835.

89. John Robinson, *The Village Oppress'd* (London, 1771), p. 13.

Ye rural thanes, that o'er the mossy down
 Some panting, timorous hare pursue;
 Does nature mean your joys alone to crown?
 Say, does she smooth her lawns for you?
 For you does echo bid the rocks reply,
 And urg'd by rude constraint resound the jovial cry?

See from the neighbouring hill, forlorn
 The wretched swain your sport survey;
 He finds his faithful fences torn,
 He finds his labour'd crops a prey;
 He sees his flock - no more in circles feed;
 Haply beneath your ravage bleed,
 And with no random curses loads the deed.

Nor yet, ye swains, conclude
 That nature smiles for you alone;
 Your bounded souls and your conceptions crude,
 The proud, the selfish boast disown...

(William Shenstone, 'Rural Elegance', 7-23)⁹⁰

Once both the benevolence of the wealthy had been denied, as it had been by Goldsmith, and the humility of the poor doubted, as it was by Robinson, the conventional pastoral image of society was under threat.

In the ferment created in England by the French Revolution Arcadia underwent many heady transformations. In *Warning To Tyrants*, 'printed for Citizen Lee, at the British Tree of Liberty', the Golden Age symbolizes a post-revolutionary society -

Now begins the Golden Age;
 Tyranny, thy reign is o'er:
 Brother shall with brother wage
 Cruel, murd'rous war no more.
 Weary earth shall now be blest,
 With tranquillity and rest.

('Golden Age', 13-18)⁹¹

In Blake's *The French Revolution* Abbé de Sieyès describes a similar future, in imagery of biblical origins -

Strenth madden'd with slavery, honesty, bound in the dens of superstition,
 May sing in the village, and shout in the harvest, and woo in pleasant
 gardens...

(228-229)⁹²

90. *The Works in Verse and Prose of William Shenstone*, edited by R. Dodsley, 3 vols (London, 1764-1769), I (1764), pp. 105-106.

91. *Warning To Tyrants* [London, 1794], p. 1.

92. *The Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, edited by David V. Erdman (New York, 1965), p. 292.

Yet even the patriarchal version of Arcadia proved remarkably resilient, appealing to radicals whose ideas were theoretically opposed to it. Allen Davenport, for instance, the first biographer of Thomas Spence, believed, with Spence, that all property should be taken over by the individual parishes on the basis of community ownership. Nevertheless, in 'Rural Reflections' Davenport describes his ideal society as follows -

He who regards the poor never dies unbless'd!
His parks, his woods, his gardens, and his fields,
Still to the poor abundant labour yields,
And labour's due reward is all they ask,
Where'er they toil, or whate'er be their task...
(38-42)⁹⁷

This view of society in which the wealthy, owning the property to be worked, and the poor, providing the labour to work it, are seen in a perfectly reciprocal relationship is fundamentally contradictory to the following, which occurs towards the end of the poem -

How poorly do the owners of the soil
Appreciate the hardships, cares and toil,
Of those whose task it is to till the ground;
And, with their hands, spread new creations round,
Of every hue that can delight the eye,
And every sweet that nature can supply!
Or why, amidst the plenty they have spread,
Do the producers feel the want of bread?
(109-116)

Here the very right of the wealthy to their wealth, since it is produced by others, is implicitly questioned. In pastoral, at least as it was commonly interpreted in the eighteenth century, society is seen as a natural and static hierarchy. The terms 'rich' and 'poor' do not in themselves express a relationship; they posit a difference merely - the rich have more than the poor. Therefore if a relationship is formed by the rich aiding the poor, it is offered solely because of the benevolence of the rich and is cemented solely by the gratitude of the poor. If, however, the terms are recast as 'owner' and 'producer', the relationship is no longer one of difference merely; the producer creates the wealth of the owner. This overturns the hierarchy, making the rich parasitic on the poor.

97. Allen Davenport, *The Muse's Wreath* (London, [1830?]), p. 50. All quotations from Davenport's poetry are from this edition.

The appeal and the longevity of the pastoral image were such that it was able to co-exist with a view of society its exact opposite without the contradictions becoming overt. With its emphasis on co-operation within a closely knit community pastoral provided a ready framework for a moral critique of social groups which seemed to be motivated by selfishness and greed. It was easy to overlook its oppressive stereotypes and hierarchical structure, which long exposure had rendered familiar, especially since the alternative 'real' view offered by Crabbe and Malthus implied permanent and increasing misery for the many. Yet pastoral, now that it was widely regarded as morally rather than socially educative, also encouraged a debilitating sentimentality which tended merely to confirm the subordinate position of the poor without committing the reader to a socially active role. A condescending pity replaced the original and functional benevolence which had been associated with a social obligation. In poems less politically motivated than the ones I have been discussing pity was often seen as the natural response to the poor and in this way pastoral merged with the kind of poetry ostensibly its opposite, in which the poor were presented as invariably and inevitably distressed.

The process of transition can be seen even in the imitations of *The Deserted Village*. For instance, at the beginning of his poem, *The Poor*, S.J. Pratt invokes the spirits of Pity and Benevolence as analogous deities (1-8).⁹⁸ The invocation, which abstracts the moral appeal left implicit in the more political imitations, indicates a change of emphasis. Pratt seeks to present

TRUTHS, that may impart
A touch of mercy to the hardest heart;
Teach avarice to feel the social sigh,
And bathe his cheek in dews of charity.
(I, 19-22)

98. S.J. Pratt, *The Poor; or, Bread*, second edition (London, 1802), p. 1. All quotations from the poem are from this edition. The third edition of the poem, published in 1803, is entitled *Cottage-Pictures* in order to indicate, as Pratt writes in his Advertisement to this edition, that 'a happy change in some circumstances has taken place'. The alterations in the text, however, are relatively minor and the new title draws attention to the way in which Pratt has arranged and framed his subject for the consumption of the reader, not only in this edition but in the previous two as well. For contemporary comparisons between Pratt and Goldsmith, see A.D. Harvey, *English Poetry in a Changing Society 1780-1825* (London, 1980), p. 60.

The ambiguity of the passage is revealing, implying, as it does, that Pratt is only interested in those truths with a manifest emotional impact. He intends not to motivate but to affect the reader. Thus charity and benevolence are no longer social responsibilities but emotions, exhausted in tears and sighs.

The apotheosis of sentiment for its own sake was common, of course, in all kinds of literature at this time but in pastoral it combined a novel development with a regression to early eighteenth-century views of the genre as a setting for the reader's fantasies. Marilyn Butler has argued that sentimental literature performed a liberating function in the eighteenth century because it forced the reader 'to perceive the limits of cerebral judgment and to embrace in its stead spontaneous sympathy'.⁹⁹ In its debased form in the late eighteenth century, however, its function was to encourage sympathy by evading the restraints of judgment. Pratt, for example, presents a stylized version of pastoral in which the strongest claim on the reader's emotional response is coupled with the least emphasis on its practical implications -

Lo! as the fainting labourer stoops to reap,
The deadly drops his clay-cold temples steep;
In pride of youth the tyrant Want prevails,
The sickle falls, and harass'd nature fails;
No aid at hand, his fellow-suff'rers round,
Behold him stretch'd a corpse upon the ground:
O for one cordial drop! in vain the pray'r!
Death, death alone, has sav'd him from despair.
(381-388)

Intervention is here, typically, exclamatory but ineffectual.

Those aspects of *The Deserted Village* which were the most exotic and which therefore made the least claim on the reader's knowledge of the contemporary rural poor were reproduced at tedious length and embroidered with the most lurid detail - descriptions of the exile in America, for instance, in which the emigrant is hunted down by Indians¹⁰⁰ or a daughter

99. Marilyn Butler, *Jane Austen and the War of Ideas* (Oxford, 1975), p. 19.

100. Gerald Fitzgerald, 'The Academic Sportsman; or, A Winter's Day', in *Bell's Classical Arrangement of Fugitive Poetry*, IV (1789), 69-85, p. 73.

is captured and enslaved.¹⁰¹ Or else the social aspect of the poem disappears completely to be replaced by a relatively uncomplicated reminiscence of the poet's birthplace¹⁰² or of a village desolated by some inhuman (and therefore unpolitical) agency such as plague.¹⁰³ The most popular poem of reminiscence, Samuel Rogers's *The Pleasures of Memory*, which went through fifteen editions between 1792 and 1806,¹⁰⁴ is a version of *The Deserted Village* for the gentry; the poet returns not to a cottage but to the village hall.

Fairies also return to the poetry. One poet reaches his ideal village after being shipwrecked and passing through a valley presided over by sylphs, satyrs and assorted classical gods and goddesses.¹⁰⁵ In another poem it is the fairies who are driven into exile.¹⁰⁶ In yet another, described as 'a reverie', the village is compared to 'an image in sweet Faery Land / When the Elves have flown away'.¹⁰⁷

However, there are crucial differences in intention and effect between these poems and Tickell's '*Fairy Land*'. The early eighteenth-century reader was supposed to accept the hiatus between the pastoral fantasy and his own mundane existence. The poet's aim was to render the fantasy sufficiently plausible that the reader would agree to indulge himself. The game was to play off intellect against desire. Gay was able to parody it by keeping the intellect in play, provoking desire but continually disappointing it. His parody would have been inappropriate,

101. Thomas Combe, *The Peasant of Auburn; or, The Emigrant* (London, 1783).

102. Henry Kirke White, 'Clifton Grove', in *Poems, Letters and Prose Fragments of Kirke White*, edited by John Drinkwater (London, 1908), pp. 5-22; Charles Ash, *Adbaston; or, Days of Youth* (London, 1814).

103. John Wilson, 'The Desolate Village', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1 (April, 1817), 70-71.

104. By 1816 more than twenty-two thousand copies had been printed (P.W. Clayden, *The Early Life of Samuel Rogers* (London, 1887), pp. 216-217). Rogers approved of his reputation as 'a child of Goldsmith' (Harvey, p. 60).

105. Conway, *The Depopulated Vale* (London, 1774).

106. Hannah Cowley, *The Scottish Village; or, Pitcairne Green* (London, 1786).

107. John Wilson, 'The Desolate Village' (43-44), p. 70.

however, to the later poems of sentiment because the dialectical process is completely absent. Their appeal lay in their pathos which in turn depended on the reader accepting their world as at least a version of the real one. The aim was not to delude the intellect but to overpower it by keeping the emotional level at such a pitch that the reader would be led to doubt his sensibility if the question of plausibility ever arose (which, of course, it frequently did). These poems focus inwards, provoking a desire not for a more perfect world but for a purer and more powerful emotion. Commonplace detail, which might distract the reader, allowing him to make comparisons and hence arousing his scepticism, was usually avoided.

Goldsmith himself imitated a passage from Gray's *Elegy* which became a definitive example of Gothic melancholy, that 'pleasing melancholy' Rogers attributed to his own poem, *The Pleasures of Memory*¹⁰⁸ -

from yonder ivy-mantled tower
The moping owl does to the moon complain
Of such as, wandering near her secret bower,
Molest her ancient solitary reign.

Beneath those rugged elms, that yew-tree's
shade,
Where heaves the turf in many a
mouldering heap,
Each in his narrow cell for ever laid,
The rude forefathers of the hamlet sleep.
(9-16)

Along thy glades, a solitary guest,
The hollow sounding bittern
guards its nest;
Amidst thy desert walks the
lapwing flies,
And tires their ecchoes with
unvaried cries.
Sunk are thy bowers in
shapeless ruin all,
And the long grass o'ertops the
mouldering wall...
(43-48)¹⁰⁹

In these two poems, of course, the passages are related firmly to a real and human setting. Lesser writers, mistaking the source of their cogency,

108. Samuel Rogers, *The Pleasures of Memory* (London, 1792), p. v.

109. *The Complete Poems of Thomas Gray*, edited by H.W. Starr and J.R. Hendrickson (Oxford, 1966), p. 38. All quotations from Gray's poetry are from this edition. Gray's 'moping owl' (10) (guarding its nest), 'her secret bower' (11), 'solitary reign' (12), 'mouldering heap' (14) become, in turn, in Goldsmith's poem, 'the hollow sounding bittern' (44) (guarding its nest), 'solitary guest' (43), 'thy bowers' (47), 'mouldering wall' (48). For a poem which, by borrowing extensively from both *The Deserted Village* and the *Elegy*, bears witness to their close relation, see Robert Lovell, 'The Decayed Farm-house', in Robert Southey and Robert Lovell, *Poems* (London, 1795), pp. 35-39.

would seek the same effect from the mere idea of age, solitude and decay¹¹⁰ or from the supernatural¹¹¹ (Gray's use of the word 'heaves', for example, carries the bizarre suggestion of breathing). John Hawkesworth makes the same error when he writes of Goldsmith's passage -

Our pity is here principally excited for what cannot suffer, for...a glade that is become the solitary haunt of the bittern, a walk deserted to the lapwing, and a wall that is half hidden by grass. We commiserate the village as a sailor does his ship, and perhaps we never contemplate the ruins of any thing magnificent or beautiful without enjoying a tender and mournful pleasure from this fanciful association of ideas.¹¹²

The commentary is misleading because it is based on an incomplete extract; the passage continues -

And trembling, shrinking from the spoiler's hand,
Far, far away, thy children leave the land.
(49-50)

Clearly a sentimental pity is part of the expected response and it is elicited most of all by the representation of the dispossessed villagers as threatened children. But the ruin, we now see, has been wrought by that anonymous 'hand'; our pity is meant to be indignant rather than 'tender' and 'mournful'. The bittern, furtively guarding its unthreatened nest, merely a 'guest' in an environment now sterile and uninviting, is an ironic reflection of the engrossing landlord in his lonely domain.

Because such contexts were disregarded, *The Deserted Village* contributed to the vogue for ruins.¹¹³ The title-page of the first edition is illustrated by an engraving by Isaac Taylor entitled 'The sad historian of the pensive plain'. The poet appears as a hermit, bare-footed with long hair and beard and dressed in a robe similar to a cassock. In the background the cottages tilt at absurd angles; the church and another unidentifiable stone building (the alehouse perhaps) have partly fallen

110. See, for example, 'The Desolate Village', in William Holloway, *The Minor Minstrel* (London, 1808), pp. 85-89.

111. See, for example, the Gothic imagery in Ebenezer Elliott's *The Splendid Village* (London, 1833).

112. John Hawkesworth, *Monthly Review*, 42 (June, 1770), 440-445; Rousseau, pp. 84-84.

113. See Paul Zucker, 'Ruins - An Aesthetic Hybrid', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 20, 2 (1961), 119-130.

down and are covered in vegetation. No attempt has been made to represent anything that might have been seen in Britain in 1770 or indeed at any other time; the only reminder of Goldsmith's argument in the poem (for the buildings show no signs of recent habitation) is suitably in the far distance - the ships presumably bearing the emigrants to America. The old woman in the foreground, far from being the village's 'historian', is divorced from it by her very normality. The engraving is a crude attempt at the picturesque and, in its compounding of exaggeration and unreality, is similar in execution to the poetry of sensibility discussed earlier.

Propounders of the picturesque were sometimes criticized for what was thought to be their moral vacuity. Mr Fax, in *Melincourt*, refers to 'everlasting talkers about taste and beauty, who see in the starving beggar only the picturesqueness of his rags, and in the ruined cottage only the harmonizing tints of moss, mildew, and stone-crop'.¹¹⁴ Certainly scenes of cultivation and industry were anathema to the picturesque idea and only those human figures with the least relation to such scenes - outlaws, outcasts such as gypsies, figures from the past or ahistorical 'figures in long, folding draperies',¹¹⁵ as in Taylor's engraving - were suitable for decoration of the picturesque landscape. The landscape was to be purged of moral associations¹¹⁶ so that 'filth and tatter'd rags'

thus abstracted from each other sense,
Give pure delight, and please without offence...

(Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape*, 265, 267-268)¹¹⁷

The attitudes Goldsmith expresses to the ruined Auburn are remote from this kind of aesthetic detachment. It is necessary to ask why a poem which was intended to inculcate a sense of social concern should have become associated with an impulse which repudiates commitment. Wilful misreading does not, I think, entirely account for the plethora of conflicting interpretations. The major cause, I have suggested, is in

114. Thomas Love Peacock, *Melincourt*, 3 vols (London, 1817), III, p. 173.

115. William Gilpin, *Observations on the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmorland* (1786), facsimile reprint (Richmond, 1973), p. 46.

116. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

117. Richard Payne Knight, *The Landscape*, second edition (1795), facsimile reprint (Farnborough, 1972), p. 18.

THE
DESERTED VILLAGE,
A
POEM.

BY DR. GOLDSMITH



The sad historian of the pensive plain.

L O N D O N :

Printed for W. GRIFFIN, at Garrick's Head, in Catharine-street, Strand.

MDCCCLXX.

the poem itself. There is a basic ambivalence in the persona Goldsmith adopts, perhaps best delineated by comparing Goldsmith's persona with those of other poets of the period.

Goldsmith's role in *The Deserted Village* is clearly not that of the detached arbiter, a role that many earlier poets, such as Charles Churchill, assumed in order to treat similar themes -

Time was, e'er Temperance had fled the realm;
E're Luxury sat guttling at the helm...
E're banish'd Industry had left our shores,
And Labour was by Pride kick'd out of doors...
E're a great Nation, not less just than free,
Was made a beggar by Economy;
E're ragged Honesty was out of vogue,
E're Fashion stamp'd her sanction on the rogue...

(*The Times*, 13-14, 21-22, 29-32)

The passage is presented as an objective history and not an individual interpretation. Churchill eschews any personal involvement with the reader because his appeal is to *common* sense only. The poem is directed towards an argument about the arrangement of the terms in which society is conceived but is not concerned with the terms themselves. The poetry is so abstract because so much has been assumed - that the reader already has a conception of the social order and of his own place in it and that his conception shares with the poet's the same terms of reference.

Goldsmith assumes none of this. His image of community is not the ship of state, the public emblem of England which enshrined the notion of a disciplined and functional hierarchy subsisting on its naval supremacy, as in Churchill's poem, but the home; his villagers are 'children' (50), Auburn is both 'parent of the blissful hour' (75) and the home to which he returns to die (96).¹¹⁸ The village is as much a refuge from society as a microcosm of it. Goldsmith is consequently less certain of his parameters than Churchill, less confident of his position

118. See 'The Revolution in Low Life' -

I spent part of the last summer in a little village, distant about fifty miles from town, consisting of near an hundred houses. It lay entirely out of the road of commerce, and was inhabited by a race of men who followed the primeval profession of agriculture for several generations... By a long intercourse and frequent intermarriages they were all become in a manner one family...

(Friedman, III, p. 195)

vis-a-vis the social order. And because this is in doubt, Goldsmith cannot rely on any inherited social sense in the reader. He has to create concern for the village, not only by making Auburn seem real but also by attaching to it a deeper, more private level of significance than Churchill seeks to reach, the emotional significance of home and family. It is not then an abstract order that is under threat in the poem but something more personal.

Ebenezer Elliott understood this aspect of *The Deserted Village* and made it more explicit in his own poem, *The Splendid Village*; he pictures himself as a wanderer returning after a long absence to his family's cottage -

My brother dwelt within. 'Tis true, he took
My offer'd hand, but froze me with a look
So trouble-worn and lost, so hard yet dull,
That I shrank from him, though my heart was full;
I sought society, but stood alone;
I came to meet a man, and found a stone!

(I, 61-66) 119

There is the same sense of alienation and insecurity in Gray's *Elegy* -

The ploughman homeward plods his weary way,
And leaves the world to darkness and to me.

(3-4)

The ploughman shares the anonymity of a group. We respond to him as to a familiar stereotype. To the poet, however, the evening does not promise the familiar comforts of home and an end to weariness. His anonymity is individual and it isolates him from the reader. We are left with him in darkness, unable to make any response at all.

The poet cannot return home in *The Deserted Village* either. Even so the effect is not at all similar. The *Elegy* and *The Splendid Village* begin and end with the poet's isolation. In the *Elegy* the poet's anxiety for the poor, lest they be scorned for their obscurity, is shown to stem from his defensiveness about himself. His ambivalent attitude to the fact of their poverty - it has inhibited their innate talents but also restrained their vices and in any case it is merely an accident of

119. *The Poetical Works of Ebenezer Elliott* (Edinburgh, 1840), p. 84. All quotations from Elliott's poetry are from this edition.

nature - is also his ambivalence with respect to his own lack of fame.¹²⁰ He insists on sympathy for the poor because sympathy is all he can expect for himself from those who, bewildered and uncomprehending, will remember him after his death. His life will become their tale and the marks on a gravestone. Similarly, the whole of *The Splendid Village* resonates with the poet's personal sense of alienation; the bitterness of the satirical portraits, the extremity of the Gothic images (of England he says, 'I look upon a corpse - 'tis putrid clay - / And Fiends possess it. Vampires, quit your prey!', II, 297-298), the exclamatory couplets, the indiscriminating relentlessness of the rhythm all contribute to the creation of the poet's personality in the poem. Gray debates with himself; Elliott is certain and condemns his society outright; yet in both poems the poet is at the centre. In that emphasis Gray is closer to the nineteenth century than Goldsmith.

One reviewer wrote in 1811 of *The Deserted Village* -

Much entertainment is afforded, and compassion excited, by the inimitable skill of the poet in displaying the characters, pastimes, and injuries of the inhabitants of his favourite Auburn: but still the reader *condescends* to be pleased, or to pity; - there is little of *fellow-feeling* in the case.¹²¹

It is this '*fellow-feeling*', empathy with individuals, that became increasingly a requirement for poetry. It is evident in Gray's characterization of the 'hoary-headed swain' (97-116) who has a self-reliant dignity extremely rare in eighteenth-century descriptions of the

120. For this reason it seems to me that comments about the poet's inadequate attitudes to the poor - he makes social injustice seem natural and inevitable (William Empson, *Some Versions of Pastoral*, revised edition (Harmondsworth, 1966), pp. 11-12) or that he wavers between admiring their way of life and acknowledging its difficulty (Williams, *The Country and the City*, p. 74) - are misplaced. The attitudes are meant, I think, to reflect more on the poet than on the poor as analogies to his own situation and in their ambivalence are dramatically appropriate. For similar readings of the poem see Frank Brady, 'Structure and Meaning in Gray's *Elegy*', in *From Sensibility to Romanticism*, edited by Frederick W. Hilles and Harold Bloom (New York, 1965), pp. 177-189 and Howard D. Weinbrot, 'Gray's *Elegy*: A Poem of Moral Choice and Resolution', *Studies in English Literature*, 18 (1978), 537-551.

121. Unsigned review of Robert Bloomfield, *The Banks of Wye* (1811), *Eclectic Review*, 7, 2 (December, 1811), 1103-1120, p. 1115.

rural poor. It is this characterization, above all, but also the poet's evident feeling of identification with the villagers which satisfy the requirement of 'fellow-feeling'. In *The Deserted Village* the poet is less central, less visible; he presents himself as a guide but not an interpreter. Our attention is directed outwards to the village, to its history and its fate. Goldsmith does not rely on his description to carry its own weight, as Churchill does; his presence and his personal attachments give the village a significance it might not otherwise have had. At the same time he does not openly invite the reader to identify with him, as do Gray and Elliott. With the exception of the portraits of the priest and schoolmaster (and it is significant that these passages became the most popular)¹²² Goldsmith's description of the village is fairly general and reserved. This reservation, together with the measured regularity of the verse, ensures a similar restraint in the reader. The regularity is interrupted only occasionally by a simple exclamation or divided line. Usually the verse connects without hesitation the personal observation and the impersonal generalization -

-
122. The extract from *The Deserted Village* published in the *Annual Register* for 1770 included both portraits (pp. 197-200) and they were published separately in the *London Magazine* for May and June, 1770 (see Rousseau, p. 87). S.J. Pratt wrote a story based on the description of the priest, entitled 'The Landlord; or, Man of Nature', as one of his *Moral Tales (Miscellanies)*, 4 vols (London, 1785), III, pp. 193-202). A shortened version was published in the *Universal Magazine*, 59 (1776), 351-352 under the title 'The Contented Cottager'. The portrait of the priest was published separately as *The Good Priest* [1785?], imitated in 'The Country Clergyman' (*Gentleman's Magazine*, 56, 2 (November, 1786), 983) and parodied in 'The Rector' by J.P. (*Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 6 (November, 1819), 197). 'The characters of the Village Schoolmaster, and the Village Clergyman', wrote Hazlitt, 'redeem a hundred faults' (*A Critical List of Authors from Select British Poets* (1824); Rousseau, p. 258). Finally, James Prior, Goldsmith's biographer, wrote -

The picture of the village preacher fixed attention for its excellence, as being at once minute and comprehensive in the characteristics, skilful in their selection, true to nature in general effect, and as forming not only the most finished specimen of a Christian pastor, but one of the most admirable pieces of poetical painting in the whole range of ancient and modern poetry.
(*Life of Goldsmith*, 2 vols (1837); Rousseau, p. 298)

To me more dear, congenial to my heart,
 One native charm, than all the gloss of art;
 Spontaneous joys, where Nature has its play,
 The soul adopts, and owns their first born sway...

(253-256)

This blending of the personal and the general is subtly achieved in the opening description of Auburn. Abstractions, such as 'health', 'plenty', 'innocence', 'ease', play their part in creating a typical village with only one distinguishing characteristic, that it is superlatively typical ('loveliest village of the plain', 1). At the same time the repeated adjectives describing Auburn ('sweet', 'dear', 'lovely'), which have been frequently but, I think, mistakenly criticized, suggest affection rather than a more impersonal admiration, preparing for the introduction of the poet in line six. Their repetition enacts the poet's reiterated sense of pleasure in Auburn ('How often...', 7, 9, 15) and their modest ordinariness reflects the reticence which has led him to delay his own introduction so far into the poem. The poet effaces himself from the initial description to such an extent that the seasonal imagery is really an inversion of the pathetic fallacy; the poet's birth and loitering youth in Auburn provide metaphors for the early arrival of spring and the lingering of summer. In the same way expressions of affection precede their attribution to the poet so that they seem to refer to qualities of place rather than associations of individual memory. Auburn is characterized by the inevitability of endearment, an inevitability more powerful than that of seasonal change and indicated by the fact that the following adjectival clause does not need to refer to the poet at all - 'Where humble happiness endeared each scene' (8). The poet endorses Auburn by suggesting that his personal affection is but a particular instance of a potentially general experience, a strategy which precludes description which might be more exact and evocative but also less general.

Of course, particularity of reference is not necessarily associated with elaborate detail, especially in this poem. It may be achieved with extreme simplicity, as in the following couplet in which the prominence of 'Here' is perhaps a more convincing assertion of Auburn's actuality than any amount of description -

I still had hopes, my long vexations past,
 Here to return - and die at home at last.

(95-96)

Yet despite its similar simplicity the style here has an effect opposite to that of the opening passage. Instead of repressing traces of individuality it repels attempts to generalize what remains a supremely private experience; the emotional climax of the couplet is reached in the silence of that unusually pronounced caesura in line ninety-six. Admittedly Goldsmith makes a characteristic and by no means awkward effort to link the passage with the more overt themes of the poem by introducing it with a comparison between himself and a hunted hare, thus figuratively associating himself with the villagers as another victim of the gentry's life-style. Nevertheless, the poem's stylistic regularity and thematic associations may disguise but do not resolve the discrepancy between Auburn, the most typical of villages, and Auburn, the most personal of enclaves.

Goldsmith's regularity is superficially similar to Gray's but in the *Elegy* the verse form enacts the sobriety which the poet imagines in the villagers. It indicates both stability and repression, an ideal but also a compromise. As the tone in which the poet debates with his other, less controlled self, 'drooping, woeful wan, like one forlorn' (107), it creates, I think, considerable tension. There is nothing at all personal about Gray's adjectives, deliberate clichés which repress individuality to the extent of refusing to acknowledge its possibility; the 'horn', for example, is inevitably 'echoing' (19) and the 'hearth' 'blazing' (21). Of course, it is death that in the poem unmasks these clichés and their denial of change (the passage from which the preceding examples were taken is full of present participles) but the poet insists on this point as if he would make of his present despair and his own imagined death yet more unavoidable clichés. The poem is rescued from this reassuring but inhuman detachment by the fact that, because emphasis is foreign to the cliché, the poem's very insistence is an expression of the poet's personality, a reminder of the individuality, with its associations of choice and lost possibilities, which he is desperately trying to avoid.

The form of *The Deserted Village* does not engage in the same dramatic way with its argument. It merely restrains both the poet's expression of his personal feelings and the reader's consequent curiosity and at one point at least causes the tone to become too detached altogether -

Thou source of all my bliss, and all my woe,
 That found'st me poor at first, and keep'st me so...
 (413-414)

The shift in tone at that point jars because it belongs to a different kind of poetry, a poetry of wit that has little to do with the 'rural virtues' on which Goldsmith's muse is supposed to depend. The inconsistency is symptomatic of uncertainties in the poem as a whole. Goldsmith wrote *The Deserted Village* at a time when the trend towards empirical observation in pastoral had not fully worked itself out in sceptical relativism.¹²³ As we have seen, poetry began to depend on the authenticity of personal experience; the poet would declare in a preface where and when he witnessed what he describes in the poem. This indicates a growing distrust of conventional representations of the social order. Yet the order of society cannot reveal itself to mere observation. *The Deserted Village* represents, I think, a quite sophisticated compromise; it seeks acceptance by presenting the pastoral conventions on a more domestic scale as an individual memory. In this way Goldsmith tried to recreate a consensus between the poet and his audience. As William Mudford wrote in 1804, 'it was the object of Goldsmith, in this poem, to speak to the judgment, through the medium of the heart'.¹²⁴ Goldsmith's persona in the poem is midway between the impersonal arbiter of Churchill and the introspective observer of Gray. His attempt to connect the two kinds of poetry in this way is, I suggest, his real innovation. And yet the poem remains, it seems to me, a compromise, torn between old and new, the poetry of judgment and the poetry of sentiment. Endeavouring to keep the reader's attention on the social process, Goldsmith remains in the background of the poem, his voice detached and controlled. Because he cannot assume sympathy, however, his drama must also be a personal tragedy. The two aspects of the poem never coalesce; each detracts from the other.

Roger Lonsdale has recently questioned the dogmatism of those critics who have asserted that the persona of *The Deserted Village* is a purely

123. See Bate, pp. 93-94.

124. William Mudford, *Essays* (London, 1804); Rousseau, p. 244.

rhetorical device with no relation to the 'real' Goldsmith.¹²⁵ The link between an author and his work is so problematic that this kind of certainty is difficult to substantiate. It seems to me, however, that in correcting this emphasis Lonsdale tends towards the other extreme, even to the point of asserting that Goldsmith's self-absorption in *The Deserted Village* is more complete than Gray's in the *Elegy*. Raymond Williams puts forward a similar argument, though he suggests that Goldsmith's identification of himself with the villagers is largely unconscious.¹²⁶ Yet if the poet is the most real character in *The Deserted Village*, this, I have argued, is as much a matter of rhetorical failure as of personal revelation, whether deliberate or unconscious. For this reason to insist on comparisons between *The Deserted Village* and the *Elegy*, without referring to the considerable differences, is misleading. Gray's predicament in the *Elegy* is expressed as a sense of exclusion and it is this that enables him to use the villagers, who do not exist for him as known individuals, almost as ciphers for himself. Goldsmith's position is the reverse of this. He needs to present himself as close to the villagers so that his subsequent isolation is seen to result solely from a particular act of 'tyranny'. He also has to create the villagers as real and separate presences because the catastrophe he wishes to emphasize is social and not simply individual. It is because the villagers are rarely more than the anonymous and remote group of conventional pastoral that we tend to respond to the poet instead. And yet the absence of tension in tone and rhythm, which invites analytical detachment rather than empathy, also hinders that response.

The Deserted Village holds in a precarious and unresolved balance the social order, on the one hand, and the individual sensibility, on the other. Its instability may be measured by the number of imitations and readings which emphasize one aspect at the expense of the other. Yet however unsatisfactory it may be, it remained, I think, unique. After the

125. Roger Lonsdale, '"A Garden, and a Grave": The Poetry of Oliver Goldsmith', in *The Author in his Work*, edited by L. Martz and A. Williams (New Haven, 1978), pp. 3-30.

126. *The Country and the City*, pp. 77-78.

food riots throughout the decades of scarcity from 1780 to 1810, the fears of Jacobin conspiracies in the 1790s and of possible insurrection in 1803 owing to rumour of an imminent invasion by Napoleon, Goldsmith's analogy between family and society became increasingly less obvious to poetry's predominantly middle-class audience. It persisted as the residue of pastoral paternalism, usually in poetry of the most artificial sentimentality; the engraving overleaf by Cardon after a drawing by De Louthembourg, the frontispiece to Pratt's *Cottage-Pictures*, is illustrative of the kind.¹²⁷ Goldsmith's picture of an ideal past survived as an anachronistic contradiction, as in Davenport, or a perfunctory contrast, as in Elliott, or was transformed into a purely local and individual past, as in Clare's 'Helpstone'. For others it served to evoke a pleasant mood simply because it was so unreal. The 'rural virtues' on which it was based became, in the absence of an inherited context, merely vague. Goldsmith's poem was attuned to his time - 'Dr Goldsmith deserves the highest applause for employing his poetical talents in the support of humanity and virtue, in an age when sentimental instruction will have more powerful influence upon our conduct than any other'¹²⁸ - but it was therefore temporary. He tried to revive with sentimental overtures an older model of poetry concerned with social unity. In the mode of eighteenth-century pastoral he tried to make his myth compelling by bringing it closer to the reader. But what his readers and imitators remembered most vividly was precisely that which was incidental to the poem - an old man unable to return home, a poor emigrant in a strange land. In a sense Goldsmith's prophecy was quite correct. His kind of poetry subordinated individual experience to a social vision based on a common morality and endorsed by a poetic delivery similarly regular and impersonal; it was driven into exile.

127. The figure of a seated woman surrounded by children was a traditional symbol of Charity (Edgar Wind, 'Charity: The Case History of a Pattern', *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, 1 (1937-1938), 322-330). In this engraving, as the poem makes clear, the woman is also the mother of the children; she has starved to death and is presumably about to rise into heaven.

128. Unsigned review, *Critical Review*, 29 (June, 1770), 435-443; Rousseau, p. 82.



"Bread give me bread"—

Chapter 4

George Crabbe

We know there is no unmixed happiness in any state
 of life; but one does not wish to be perpetually told so.
 Letter from John Scott to James Beattie (August, 1783)

The Village has traditionally been seen as Crabbe's reply to Goldsmith. According to Francis Jeffrey, 'when *The Village* was first published, it was commonly considered as an antidote or answer to the more captivating representations of *The Deserted Village*'.¹ Whereas Goldsmith's poem was thought to have had more 'warmth of colouring', Crabbe's was 'too true a picture'.² Crabbe's poem had 'much truth and nature', though Goldsmith's was the more 'pleasing delusion'.³ Crabbe had 'a keener eye for observation', Goldsmith a more 'fastidious taste'.⁴ Goldsmith was 'a theorist', Crabbe 'an actual and feeling spectator'.⁵ Where both poets had exaggerated, it was commonly felt, Goldsmith had heightened his poem in order to please the reader while Crabbe's extremity was due to the nature of his particular temperament and experience.

The contrast has much truth in it. I have already suggested that *The Deserted Village* was an adaptation of a conventional mode of poetry to a new taste. At the same time, however, it should be recognized that Crabbe's reception is an indication of Goldsmith's failure, signifying a

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1. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 12 (April, 1808), 131-151, in *Crabbe: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Arthur Pollard (London, 1972), p. 55.
 2. Unsigned review, *Critical Review*, 56 (July, 1783), 60-61; *ibid.*, pp. 41-42.
 3. Unsigned review, *Anti-jacobin Review*, 28 (December, 1807), 337-347; *ibid.*, p. 52.
 4. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 12 (April, 1808), 131-151; *ibid.*, p. 55.
 5. Unsigned review, *Annual Review*, 6 (1808), 513-521; *ibid.*, p. 64.

change in the popular conception of pastoral. Crabbe declared that the history of pastoral was one of wishful artifice; most of his readers, though for differing reasons, agreed. All the previous developments in pastoral towards realism were ignored. Although consent to Crabbe's implicit evaluation of Goldsmith's poem was usually withheld, *The Deserted Village* was now read in the light of his judgment and not as a poem which had attempted an accurate portrayal of rural society. A poem written explicitly in spite of its readers became a poem written exclusively for its readers.

One reason for this we have already examined. Goldsmith's mode of presenting his view of society was sufficiently unconvincing and ambivalent for his poem to be read in the manner most congenial to its readers. *The Village* is even more disjointed; it was recognized immediately that its conclusion did not develop from the rest of the poem.⁶ Nevertheless, the divisions in the poem were too obvious for it to be moulded by its readers into a specious unity. The superficiality of Crabbe's eulogy on Robert Manners merely served to accentuate the iconoclasm of the rest of the poem. In *The Village*, as in all his best poetry, he brought to the fore problems concerning the function and status of poetry which had hitherto been only obliquely raised by the new poetic trends. Among Crabbe's reviewers there were those who continued to argue that the poet should cultivate accuracy of detail only so as to make his illusions more convincing. There were others who rejected illusion in favour of an approach either more strictly mimetic or more stringently moral. Nevertheless, the fact that most reviewers accepted Crabbe's reading of earlier pastoral as wholly artificial, differing only on the question whether its artificiality was to be approved or not, suggests that the growing emphasis on accuracy did not continue to make allowance for the subtle gradations of truth and fancy which had been the substance of earlier pastoral theory. Not only were the proponents

6. See, for example, the unsigned review in the *Critical Review*, 56 (July, 1783), 60-61 (ibid., p. 42) - 'The subject is broken off rather abruptly towards the conclusion, where we meet with a long encomium on the Duke of Rutland, and the hon. Captain Manners'.

of fancy and those of truth now divided, however; the latter greatly outnumbered the former.

As a result of these critical divisions Crabbe was controversial throughout his career. I intend to examine three main grounds of debate - firstly, that his poetry was too extreme to be realistic; secondly, that it was too extreme to be poetic; thirdly, that in the attitudes which it encouraged towards the poor it was morally and politically culpable. The point to be made at the outset is that these areas of controversy were never distinct. Though more readers rejected the poetry in the name of truth than in the name of fancy, the reasons given tended to coincide in focusing on the poetry's unpleasantness. Crabbe was felt by many to have revealed the limits of poetry by passing beyond them. This kind of proscription is often a rationalization of unease but to acknowledge this is not to say that criticisms of Crabbe were all nugatory or evasive. Nevertheless, the different and disputed standards employed to demonstrate that Crabbe was wanting were not adequately recognized as versions of each other. At the core of the debate, while the protagonists battled on the perimeter, politics, morality and aesthetics were inextricable.

To reach the core, however, we must start at the circumference. In response to almost every one of Crabbe's publications the complaint was raised that his poetry was too sombre to be a true representation of rural life. In a review of *The Village* Edmund Cartwright wrote -

It is not...improbable that he may have erred as much as those whom he condemns. For it may be questioned whether he, who represents a peasant's life as a life of unremitting labour and remediless anxiety; who describes his best years as embittered by insult and oppression, and his old age as squalid, comfortless, and destitute, gives a juster representation of rural enjoyments than they, who, running into a contrary extreme, paint the face of the country as wearing a perpetual smile, and its inhabitants as passing away their hours in uninterrupted pleasure, and unvaried tranquillity.⁷

Similarly, of *Poems* (1807) it was written -

We hope...that if pastoral writers have drawn too placid and happy a picture of rural innocence and manners, Mr. Crabbe has, on the other hand, sketched too dark and gloomy a one...⁸

7. Edmund Cartwright, *Monthly Review*, 69 (November, 1783), 418-421; *ibid.*, pp. 42-43.

8. Unsigned review, *Universal Magazine*, 2nd ser., 10 (November, 1808), 434-438; *ibid.*, p. 67.

And of *The Borough* (1810) -

Mr. Crabbe has lived a great deal in a smuggling neighbourhood, and has observed that the country there is a very different thing from what our Arcadian poets have represented it: he therefore very naturally falls into the other extreme, and sees nothing but vice in every village, and poverty in every cottage.⁹

And of the *Tales* (1812) -

The volume in our hands is not a mirror in which poor human nature, even in the social and educated man, sees a sprightly image of herself; and Mr. Crabbe must forgive us for hoping that the imperfection of the glass gives us back ourselves with some infidelity and distortion. His representation is the more painful, as it imports to be a faithful copy of living manners; and it is difficult to escape from the general sentence of degradation pronounced upon us, but by supposing the writer to speak a language dictated by a partial acquaintance with men, or provoked by particular disappointments.¹⁰

It will have been noticed that these comments, which are representative, are hesitant in their criticism; they rely on probability rather than fact to refute Crabbe. Crabbe's poetry is not an illustration of a specific argument, like Goldsmith's, and therefore it remains fairly invulnerable to a marshalling of evidence. Quality of life cannot be proven or disproven. It is not surprising that Crabbe's reviewers were uncertain; the standard of living of the rural poor at this time is still a subject of controversy. One historian has suggested that the classical view of a positive decline in the living standards of the poor¹¹ is not yet untenable.¹² Others have argued that living standards for all classes rose absolutely over the period with which we are concerned.¹³ Yet another has proposed that there was a decline relative to other classes

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9. Unsigned review, *Monthly Mirror*, 8 (August, 1810), 126-134; *ibid.*, p.114.
 10. Unsigned review, *British Review*, 4 (October, 1812), 51-64; *ibid.*, p.159.
 11. See J.L. and B. Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760-1832* (London, 1927).
 12. E. Hobsbawm, *Labouring Men* (London, 1964), pp. 64-104, 120-125.
 13. See, for example, T.S. Ashton, 'The Standard of Life of the Workers in England 1790-1830', *Journal of Economic History*, Supp. 11 (1949), 19-38 (though Ashton regards 'seasonally employed agricultural workers' as exceptions, p. 38); R.M. Hartwell, 'The Rising Standard of Living in England, 1800-1850', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 13, 3 (1961), 397-416.

and that, psychologically, it seemed to the poor to be an absolute decline.¹⁴ A resolution that has eluded the sophisticated techniques of modern historians is not likely to have revealed itself to the more casual observations of Crabbe's contemporaries. Nevertheless, what is perhaps surprising is that Crabbe's reviewers make no attempt to adduce evidence in criticism of his poetry, though they recognize that it is intended to be 'a faithful copy of living manners'. Crabbe's reception bears a number of similarities to criticism of *The Deserted Village*, in which assertions of fact also tended to be supported by appeals to principle instead of evidence, as in this passage from the *Critical Review* -

He who reads the *Deserted Village*, and is not acquainted with the face of our country, may imagine, that there are many deserted villages to be found in it, and many more tracts of uncultivated land than formerly. England wears now a more smiling aspect than she ever did; and few ruined villages are to be met with except on poetical ground. - Whatever is, must be ultimately right, and productive of universal good. When the author of nature formed us, he knew, that, by our constitution we must pass from barbarism to a more improved state; and that, in process of time, we should arrive at a state of opulence, luxury, and refinement; a state which, perhaps, is as productive of happiness as of misery, to mankind.¹⁵

Critics of Crabbe echoed this reviewer's insistence that society bears evidence of as much happiness as misery but not his belief that it is continually approaching a state of perfection. The passage reveals how easily Pope's description in *An Essay on Man* of an underlying order determining the distribution of happiness and misery could be adapted to a Whig interpretation of history (an adaptation which demonstrates, incidentally, the difficulties inherent in arguing that 'Tory' and 'Whig' were the primary oppositions in eighteenth-century pastoral criticism). The rightness of everything is projected into the ultimate future and a confident belief in improvement is not disturbed by an expectation of the continuing existence of misery. What is crucially lacking in the responses to Crabbe quoted earlier is such a contextual idea of order, whether as an

14. Thompson, pp. 347-351.

15. Unsigned review, *Critical Review*, 29 (June, 1770), 435-443; Rousseau, p. 77.

existing fact or as a goal which reality is inexorably approaching. Without this context the idea of the mean in decorum, a balance of the real and the ideal, degenerated, as far as descriptive poetry, at least, was concerned, into the idea of the average, a balance of probabilities, which scarcely distinguished the idea of poetry from the idea of history.¹⁶ Generality became merely the correct means of representing reality, a standard against which the accuracy of individual representations could be judged, rather than an holistic ideal of both representation and evaluation. This critical attitude militated against poetic representations of reality as malleable, whether by means of the individual imagination or social progress, in the name of a higher ideal. The reviewers advocate, in reply to Crabbe, merely a more complacent pessimism.

Crabbe's assault in *The Village*, therefore, on what he thought was a current mood of oblivious optimism, sustained by the deceptions of pastoral, was thoroughly misguided. As the response to Goldsmith had demonstrated, belief in Arcadia even as a symbol for social unity and well-being had already dwindled; it survived in poetry, as we have seen,

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16. On the increasing approximation of the study of poetry to the study of history in the eighteenth century, see R.L. Brett, 'The Aesthetic Sense and Taste in the Literary Criticism of the Early Eighteenth Century', *Review of English Studies*, 20, 79 (July, 1944), 199-213, pp. 211-213. According to Brett, Thomas Blackwell's *Inquiry into the Life and Writings of Homer* (1735) was the first important use in the eighteenth century of the historical method in criticism, which related poetry to its historical conditions, and it is significant that Blackwell derives Homer's success from the fact that he imitated Grecian manners at a time when they were neither too barbarous nor too civilized, an argument which depends on what I have called the idea of the average -

Homer had the good fortune to see and learn the Grecian manners at their true pitch and happiest temper for verse. Had he been born much sooner he could have seen nothing but nakedness and barbarity; had he come much later, he had fallen either in times of peace, when a wide and settled policy prevailed over Greece, or in general wars, regularly carried on by civilized states, when private passions are buried in the common order and established discipline.

(Elledge, I, p. 447)

as a distorted remnant of its former self.¹⁷ *The Village*, then, is a belated polemic against pastoral and poetry embodying the idea of progress. It has sometimes been thought that pastoral and the idea of progress were simple opposites, the former promoting a concept of natural simplicity, often situated in a less civilized past, and the latter dependent on a belief in the possibility of improvement by social means.¹⁸ However, Lois Whitney has demonstrated that in the eighteenth century even primitivism was not necessarily thought to be incompatible with a commitment to progress and that simplicity, whether modelled on a state of nature or contemporary rural life, was often regarded as an essential accompaniment to, or legitimating goal of, civilization.¹⁹ In *The Village* Crabbe is continually replying to putative objections derived from poetry embodying both ideas and implies that, whatever the local oppositions between them, they both convey a delusive attitude to the poor. Thomson, for example, responds with exclamations to hay-making and sheep-shearing ('A simple scene! yet hence Britannia sees / Her solid grandeur rise', *Summer*, 423-424); Crabbe concedes wryly -

I grant indeed that fields and flocks have charms
For him that grazes or for him that farms...

(I, 39-40)²⁰

Whereas Goldsmith appeals to the politicians to prevent the demolition of villages, Crabbe addresses the poor themselves -

Can poets soothe you, when you pine for bread,
By winding myrtles round your ruin'd shed?

(I, 59-60)

17. Encouraged by the French Revolution, Godwin, among others, continued to expound a theory of progress. The idea survived, however, as a contentious and radical doctrine rather than a confident, though disputed, assumption. Bentham, referring to the idea of progress, observed that 'these glorious expectations remind us of the golden age of poetry' (quoted in J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress* (London, 1920), p. 230). See pp. 75-76.

18. See, for example, R.D. Havens, 'Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in Thomson', *Studies in Philology*, 29, 1 (January, 1932), 41-52.

19. Whitney, pp. 1, 137, 206-297.

20. George Crabbe, *Poems*, edited by A.W. Ward, 3 vols (Cambridge, 1905-1907), I (1905), p. 121. All quotations from Crabbe's poetry are from this edition.

In place of the quaint village games which Goldsmith describes, Crabbe's villagers play a dangerous game with smugglers and excisemen (I, 93-108); in place of the 'simple life' celebrated in pastoral, Crabbe finds 'Rapine and Wrong and Fear' (I, 110-111). Whereas John Armstrong describes health as 'the reward of rude and sober life',²¹ Crabbe declares this attitude to be a hypocritical rationalization of the wealthy, based on ignorance (I, 140-153). Whereas John Cunningham sees in the cottage Peace and Content,²² Crabbe sees only illness and despair (I, 172-179). To those who would, with Thomas Parnell, prescribe the country life as a cure for the enervating 'Disease' of Sloth,²³ Crabbe suggests that they imagine the pain of those 'Despised, neglected, left alone to die' (I, 259). Even his famous description of the Aldeburgh landscape (I, 63-84) is a parody of topographical poetry; Crabbe points out in succession the notable features of the scene, in this case, sand, weeds, and a withered crop, and composes a canvas of unnatural colours.

The 'sad splendour' (I, 78) of Crabbe's landscape also ironically parallels the 'barren splendour' of Goldsmith's England in *The Deserted Village* (286). Whereas Goldsmith describes England as being 'by luxury betrayed' (295), Crabbe typically implies that he is portraying the country's natural state. *The Village* is a savage indictment, in other words, not only of a once powerful ideology but also of existing society. Crabbe demolishes an image of social harmony only to replace it with one of parasitic exploitation. Earlier in the century the idea of progress had provided the social context for the 'moral economy' of pastoral. The reciprocal relationship between Commerce and Agriculture was an extrapolation from that in pastoral between landlord and tenant, a connection illuminated by a pastoral dialogue between George Agriculture and John Commerce, published in 1765, in which Commerce explains to Agriculture -

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21. John Armstrong, *The Art of Preserving Health* (London, 1744), p. 63.
 22. John Cunningham, 'Content: A Pastoral', in *Poems, Chiefly Pastoral* (London, 1766), pp. 20-22.
 23. Thomas Parnell, 'Health: An Eclogue' in *Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1722), pp. 116-121.

our interests are combined.
 Am I in health? th'effects are seen;
 Your fields rejoice in deeper green.
 Am I in cash? my certain gains
 Are felt thro' your remotest veins.
 (146-150) ²⁴

In return for these benefits Commerce demands only that Agriculture be properly appreciative. Goldsmith's castigation of commerce is similar to the indictments of landlords for selfish irresponsibility, which were an integral feature of eighteenth-century pastoral. To Crabbe, however, slavery is a closer approximation to the true relationship (I, 135-139); the only benefit the Suffolk poor derive from commerce is obtained illegally through contraband (I, 101-108). The priest is still the embodiment of social morality but now it is seen to be a morality determined solely by status and self-interest (I, 302-317).

Protests were clearly inevitable. The question which now arises, however, is, why were they so muted? Why were Crabbe's readers able to distance themselves from his accusations? First of all, it is necessary to realize how variously Crabbe defines the audience for his poem - 'you, ye poor' (I, 55; II, 101), 'you...that languishes with wealth' (I, 140-141), 'ye gentle souls, who dream of rural ease' (I, 172), 'oft may you see him, when he tends the sheep' (I, 200), 'ye, oppress'd by some fantastic woes' (I, 250), 'why, you ask, these humble crimes relate' (II, 87). In a poem which insists on the irrelevance of poetry to the poor and which, moreover, cost two shillings and sixpence, Crabbe's apostrophes to the poor are rhetorical only. In fact, most of Crabbe's interrogations do not require an answer, since they referred to beliefs which the majority of his readers no longer held or to a class to which they did not belong. Satire at the expense of the aristocracy had by this time a long pedigree in poetry. The only occasions on which the average reader would have thought himself directly addressed are innocuous - when, for instance, Crabbe invites him to make an observation or when he is specifically distinguished from 'the poor', on the one hand, and 'the great', on the other (II, 87-88). Moreover, when he has for the second time introduced the poem as being about 'the Village Life',

24. *Agriculture and Commerce, A Dialogue* (London, 1765), p. 6.

this begins to seem less a proem than a restriction of subject, as though he were disclaiming any connection between the way of life he delineates and that of his readers.

In fact, the whole of Book II seems a restriction of that which precedes it. At the outset Crabbe asks only that his readers 'own the Village Life a life of pain' (2), as if the only possible response to the injustices he has described in Book I is to acknowledge their existence. Once this has been done, we can then proceed, apparently, to acknowledge that the poor have some pleasures, even though these are begrudged by their employers and exploited by the poor for immoral purposes. Indeed, the vices of the poor balance and, in effect, cancel those of the rich. This, the poem's real conclusion, Crabbe presents as a source of consolation for the labourer and the aristocrat and, by implication and in effect, as we shall see, a source of self-congratulation to the middle-class reader who remains unimplicated.

The tone of Crabbe's later poetry is not that of *The Village*. Unknown and abjectly poor in 1780, he had become, a mere three years later, the famous protégé of Burke and Johnson. In *The Parish Register*, published in 1807, his criticism of the pastoral poets is now casual rather than urgent. He is no longer concerned to expose the social ills which they have obscured but merely to reaffirm the obvious truths which they pretended to deny - there is good and there is evil; hence some of the poor are virtuous, though most are not ('Baptisms', 27-30). Rural misery is now presented as the result of moral deficiencies rather than social injustices -

Whence all these woes? - From want of virtuous will,
Of honest shame, of time-improving skill;
From want of care t'employ the vacant hour,
And want of ev'ry kind but want of power.

('Baptisms', 226-229)

As even more significant indication of Crabbe's real priorities is that as he begins to devote his attention more exclusively to moral questions, the social context presented in his poetry becomes more conventional. In *The Parish Register* when the poor are virtuous, their landlords are 'indulgent' ('Baptisms', 129). In a poem written in 1813 but first published by Ward, entitled 'Tracy', Crabbe creates a typically Augustan village in which the honest cottagers reward their landlord's benevolence with a proud loyalty. Finally, in *The Tales of the Hall*, published in

1819, the poor become once again the amorphous group of earlier poetry, relegated to the periphery of vision. Of this publication Crabbe wrote, 'my people are of superior classes, though not the *most* elevated, and, with a few exceptions, are of educated and cultivated minds and habits'.²⁵

The centre of interest in the poetry shifts not only up the social scale but also from the network of community to the problems of individuals struggling with their own weaknesses. The progression was inevitable, for even though Crabbe's characters define themselves through their relationships with others, the physical isolation and misanthropy of Peter Grimes, for example, being indicative of his moral bankruptcy, his communities are never more than collections of people living in the same area. The social unit bonded by ties stronger than poverty or vice was, for Crabbe, the family. His outrage is greatest when the family is threatened, when, for instance, familial bonds are superseded by 'the cold charities' of the workhouse (*The Village*, I, 245). In his later poetry Crabbe is more clearly the heir of poets such as Dyer and Goldsmith. Social distinctions became less important than moral standards. Because of this the later poems were more directly challenging to his contemporaries than *The Village*; critics began to see in them not so much the squalor of rural life as the degradation of human nature.

It is perhaps also partly because of this new immediacy which made detachment more difficult that even though Crabbe's condemnation of rural vice had become more discriminating, accusations of extremity continued to be levelled against his poetry. Nevertheless, those who defended the accuracy of Crabbe's observations still found means of setting themselves at one remove from them. Crabbe's poetry was, in fact, cited as confirmation of the superiority of the middle classes, literature's dominant public, according to Jeffrey -

25. In a letter to Mary Leadbeater (5 November, 1819), in *The Leadbeater Papers*, 2 vols (London, 1862), II, p. 363.

In this country, there probably are not less than two hundred thousand persons who read for amusement or instruction among the middling classes of society. In the higher classes, they are not as many as twenty thousand.²⁶

Crabbe, Jeffrey claimed, had broadened the scope of poetry and undermined social prejudices. At the same time he had assigned to the middle classes the central position they deserved, being more refined than the poor and less dissipated than the aristocracy.²⁷ According to John Wilson,

26. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 20 (November, 1812), 277-305; Pollard, p. 166. Jeffrey's observation is supported by remarks made in response to the conclusion of *The Village* -

Would all this exuberance of praise have been bestowed, had a young midshipman, the son of some obscure tradesman, died as bravely? - No. But for a *Lord* to perish so early it was quite another thing! Poetry is debased to prostitution when she gives to title what ought to be given to truth.

(Unsigned review, *Universal Magazine*, 2nd ser., 10 (November, 1808), 434-438; *ibid.*, p. 68)

See also James Montgomery's response to Crabbe's preface to *Poems* - "Mr.C., you are much too obsequious to great folks not to provoke the spleen of little ones" (*Eclectic Review*, 5 (January, 1809), 40-49; *ibid.*, p. 75).

Jeffrey defined the audience for Maria Edgeworth's *Popular Tales* similarly as 'the great and respectable multitude of English tradesmen, yeomen, and manufacturers...that most important part of our population which consists of the well-educated in the lower and middling orders of the people' (*Edinburgh Review*, 4, 8 (July, 1804), 329-337, p. 330). Crabbe's poetry was often compared to Maria Edgeworth's tales (Pollard, pp. 165, 198-199, 207, 211).

See also Frances Reynolds -

In the present state of society, taste seems to be equally excluded from the highest and from the lowest sphere of life. The one seems to be too much encumbered with artificial imaginary necessities; the other too much encumbered with the real and natural necessities of life, to attend to its cultivation.

(p. 46).

27. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 20 (November, 1812), 277-305; Pollard, pp. 165-167. See also T.N. Talfourd, *Pamphleteer*, 5 (1815), 437-443; *ibid.*, pp. 207-208, and Crabbe's own note on *The Borough* in his commonplace book (*ibid.*, p. 79). Thomas Maude, in the introduction to his poem *Wensleydale; or, Rural Contemplations*, third edition (London, 1780), wrote that

rural enjoyment, in its perfection, is not perhaps to be sought in the palace, nor always in the cottage, but chiefly in that middle state of life which animates decency with taste, where judgment guides economy, where hereditary or acquired property, with beneficence, commands respect and esteem, but excludes avarice, vanity, pride, and every more turbulent passion.

(p. xii)

he had demonstrated that the morality of the majority of his readers was universally applicable. He thus questioned their intolerance when it was based on social divisions. In a sense, however, he confirmed such intolerance when it derived from moral rules, thus transposing the social code into its moral equivalent.

The power is almost miraculous with which he has stirred up human nature from its very dregs, and shewn working in them the common spirit of humanity. Human life becomes more various and wonderful in his hands, pregnant with passion as it seems to be, throughout the lowest debasement of profligacy and ignorance. He lays before us scenes and characters from which in real life we would turn our eyes in intolerant disgust; and yet he forces us to own, that on such scenes and by such characters much the same kind of part is played that ourselves, and others like us, play on another stage.

In all the poetry of this extraordinary man, we see a constant display of the passions as they are excited and exacerbated by the customs, and laws, and institutions of society... We see love breaking through in desperation, but never with impunity, the barriers of human laws...²⁸

Crabbe's poetry, in other words, dramatizes the conflict between individual passion and 'human laws'. The latter, upheld, in effect, by the enfranchised part of the middle classes, are as close as possible, we are led to infer from the reference to inevitable punishment, to God's own.

Wilson's description is not derived from any particular poem. To determine the extent to which it is appropriate as a generalization about Crabbe's poetry I have chosen a poem which was almost universally popular in the early nineteenth century, 'Edward Shore',²⁹ a poem which seems to fit neatly into Wilson's category. Edward pits his will against accepted codes of behaviour endorsed by religion, arguing that an action prompted solely by reason will be more beneficial both to himself and to others than coerced virtue or restrained vice. His reliance on will and reason, however, is shown to be an inadequate alternative by his adultery with his friend's wife; he eventually goes insane. This, at least, is how Wilson, I think, would have read the poem and how Crabbe himself seems to have wanted it to be read (see lines 17 to 30). Nevertheless, it seems to me that this reading responds only to the poem's weakest points. Crabbe

28. John Wilson, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 5 (July, 1819), 469-483; Pollard, pp. 223-224.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 169, 174, 177, 179, 195, 235.

builds into the poem a bias which too obviously determines its outcome. Edward's changing allegiance to contradictory ideas is motivated by anything but reason and will. His initial scorn for convention stems from a desire for notoriety; though he is an avowed believer in disinterested reason, Crabbe shows him to be a 'slave to fame' (103). After committing adultery, he professes a belief in predestination, clearly in an attempt to absolve himself from guilt. Moreover, Edward's most coherently expressed ideas are similar to a theory which most of Crabbe's readers would have regarded as outmoded. In his *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, first published in 1793, William Godwin had written -

As long as a man is held in the trammels of obedience, and habituated to look to some foreign guidance for the direction of his conduct, his understanding and the vigour of his mind will sleep. Do I desire to raise him to the energy of which he is capable? I must teach him to feel himself, to bow to no authority, to examine the principles he entertains, and render to his mind the reason of his conduct.³⁰

Godwin also believed that a vicious action was the result of an erroneous perception of circumstances and that error in turn was caused by a concatenation of impressions over which the individual had no control -

[U]nder the system of necessity, the terms, guilt, crime, desert and accountableness, in the abstract and general sense in which they have sometimes been applied, have no place.³¹

Godwin's popularity did not much outlast the eighteenth century. Edward's theory, related to an unfashionable doctrine and developed from impulses which contradict it, would have been unpersuasive to readers in 1812, when the *Tales* were published, even before it was put to the test and even if Crabbe had not already directed at the beginning of the poem how it was to be regarded.

However, if we trust the tale instead, we discover sources of power irrelevant to Crabbe's overt intentions. The image of restlessness, for example, is crucial in preparing the reader for the central scene of adultery. Edward's 'restless thoughts' at the beginning of the poem indicate a conceited fastidiousness and an inability to cope with 'worldly cares' (49-50). He has neither the experience nor the initiative to resolve

30. William Godwin, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice*, edited by F.E.L. Priestley, third edition, 3 vols (Toronto, 1946), II, p. 409.

31. Priestley, I, p. 394.

his unrest (101-102); he lacks the balance of maturity, a centre to 'fix the vacillating mind' (121-122). When he does achieve calm, it is the shallow and incapacitating rest of abstraction and withdrawal (140-143). However, his usual restlessness is not destructive like that of his friend, who seeks to create disturbance in order to justify his own perplexity and wishes to reduce others to the level of his own cynicism (176-191). Thus, he is perversely satisfied by Edward's betrayal, 'still cool, though grieved' (297). His wife's natural restlessness, by contrast, is the boisterous energy of youth; she marries for

walks on hilly heath to banish spleen,
And summer-visits when the roads were clean.
(206-207)

She does not feel the need for any justification of her actions except the most conventional or trivial.

By the time we come to the central passage (271-280), we have been led to see restlessness as a sign of inadequacy. We have also been taught to discriminate between different levels of inadequacy - the superficial but harmless activity of the girl; Edward's casual, irresponsible, but nevertheless intelligent vacillation; his friend's trivializing inconsistency. We recognize that, when left alone with Edward, the girl is now not restlessly energetic but, uncharacteristically, uneasy. She is out of her depth. She knows that the situation calls for a level of maturity that she can only mimic -

restless still, to new resources fled;
Then laugh'd aloud, then tried to look serene...
(278-279)

Edward's 'troubled eye' (271) imprisons her in her embarrassment; he controls the scene which opens and closes with his observing. Crabbe deftly suggests the pressures at work in Edward's calculating, perhaps even accusing, watchfulness and the girl's ineffectual, half-hearted attempts at escape. The passage comes to a rest which is unsettling - 'And ever changed, and every change was seen' (280). Edward observes the girl with almost the same kind of casual, aloof, emotionally neutral interest with which he previously observed 'life's shifting scene' (141) but now he is 'troubled' rather than simply 'curious' because he feels for the first time impelled to involve himself. His unsympathetic and adolescent feeling of 'daring' (272), however, presages disaster, revealing him to

be more immature than the girl because less consciously so. The final image of Edward as a simpleton at the beck and call of the local children reinforces our conclusions excessively. Nevertheless, the portrait of Edward remains, I think, more compelling than the balancing one of Anna, his constant but shadowy friend, who ministers to him at the end 'with mild religious pity' (447). As Crabbe himself points out, Edward and the young wife have, in their vulnerable adolescence, 'a dangerous grace' (235), even if only by the deceptive light of the moon. Their restless folly is more attractive than Anna's steady righteousness and this feeling cannot be exorcised by the regimen of conformity that Crabbe seems to advocate. Anna, by contrast, rests upon a dead centre.

Many of Crabbe's poems are susceptible of this kind of dual interpretation. On the one hand, he seems to prove the inviolability of convention. On the other, he seems to demonstrate the need for humility, the capacity to come to terms with one's own limitations, and the importance of respect, the ability to honour the differences of others, a lesson tempered by Crabbe's own humility and respect for human frailty. In most of the poems, however, as in 'Edward Shore' the poetry seems to me to work against one or other of these interpretations and sometimes to undermine Crabbe's evident intentions. 'The Frank Courtship', for example, can be read as, in part, a tale illustrating the importance of obeying one's parents. Yet it is the complexity of the conflict between the father's narrow sobriety and the daughter's centreless vivacity rather than its resolution which engages the reader. Moral judgments are continually being traced in the poem to exertions of will, manifestations of self-importance, rationalized temptations or disguised self-interest; yet at the same time Crabbe manages to elicit from the reader affection for the characters concerned rather than disapproval. It is in the gap between the intention and the event, between the impulse and the intention, that their humanity is expressed. Sybil's imperious father, Jonas, for example, who 'never pardon'd freedom or neglect' (14) is subject to a temporary 'fit of pride and fondness' for his wayward daughter whenever she nestles against him (216-221). When he brings her to the man he intends her to marry, his introduction is forbiddingly abrupt -

"Daughter, my friend - my daughter, friend" - he cried,
And gave a meaning look, and stepp'd aside;
That look contain'd a mingled threat and prayer...
(333-335)

It is with that look of restrained entreaty, however, that he betrays himself; his comic pomposity is balanced by his endearing apprehension. Crabbe's presence is obliquely felt in this poem, controlling rather than determining responses. In his description of Jonas, for instance, 'Erect, morose, determined, solemn, slow' (3), what seems to be a mocking enumeration of imposing characteristics is tempered by the suggestion of loneliness conveyed by the echo of the well-known opening line of Goldsmith's *The Traveller* ('Remote, unfriended, melancholy, slow'); we consequently suspend judgment. In this superb comedy of manners Crabbe exposes the fallibility of the inflexible moral standards that he elsewhere imposes so officiously on his poems.

Crabbe's ideals, when expressed as aphorisms, tend to be uninspiring. The common sense he advocates, for instance, is frequently no more than a resigned pragmatism, as in 'The Widow's Tale' -

Passion to reason will submit - or why
Should wealthy maids the poorest swains deny?
(198-199)

In this poem the farmer's daughter, Nancy, sets aside her conceited adolescent romances not through a maturing appreciation of her family and neighbours but because she is taught by the widow the power of class divisions. Peter New has argued that the widow's advice quoted above is 'simply inadequate',³² and is meant to be seen as such. So it must seem to the modern reader, especially since the compelling delineations of Nancy's self-righteous distaste and her family's rude vitality have led us to expect a more complex denouement. Yet New does not offer a more convincing explanation of Nancy's sudden change of heart. Crabbe, on the other hand, explicitly endorses the widow's precept and would have us believe that Nancy has mechanically adopted it -

As prudent travellers for their ease assume
Their modes and language to whose lands they come:
So to the farmer this fair lass inclined...
(387-389)

Those readers who defended Crabbe's realism by pointing to his approval of accepted conventions undoubtedly received support from Crabbe himself. In all of the tales discussed the characters are defined - Jonas as a

32. Peter New, *George Crabbe's Poetry* (London, 1976), p. 158.

puritan, Edward a free-thinker, Nancy a farmer's daughter - so that the average reader need not have felt implicated. But in his best poetry the attempts of the individuals portrayed to come to terms with themselves and with others are more important than the moral codes which at times guide and at times obstruct them. The poetry has a subtlety that eluded his reviewers at either extreme, both those who approved of his complacency and those who rejected him, seeing in his plots only a pattern of constant failure. On the other hand, Jeffrey's description of the manner in which Crabbe portrays the different classes in his poetry is, I think, more just, though again I would draw from this conclusions contrary to his.

'Ellen Orford', a tale from *The Borough*, is an example of the way in which Crabbe's tales are determined by class. It was as popular as 'Edward Shore'³³ and bears a number of striking similarities, though Ellen is a woman who for most of her life relies on parish assistance. Ellen, seeking relief from the hardship of her family's poverty, takes a lover and bears a child before she is married; the child is born retarded. The husband she eventually marries is converted to Methodism and, feeling that he has been predestined to sin, hangs himself. A son is taught by radicals that 'the laws / Made wrong and right; there was no other cause' (274-275) and is hanged for an unnamed crime. Another son commits incest with his retarded sister, who dies in childbirth. As in 'Edward Shore', unconventional ideas and actions are shown to have disastrous consequences. The obvious difference, however, is that Crabbe's readers could not possibly have related this catalogue of calamity to their own experience. On a superficial level the tale follows the same pattern as 'Edward Shore' but Edward's struggle to assimilate his ideas is absent. The lesson presented is of the susceptibility, the moral simplicity, of the poor and their need to be protected from ideas which Crabbe regarded as unacceptable. Although Crabbe portrays, as Jeffrey put it, 'our *universal* nature',³⁴ it is a universality which is still organized hierarchically. If Ellen's family shares the same problems as Edward, it

33. Pollard, pp. 105, 110, 295, 343.

34. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 16 (April, 1810), 30-55; *ibid.*, p. 86.

is on a much cruder level; we inevitably respond to the former with pity and only to the latter with compassion.³⁵

At the same time it must be recognized that Crabbe's urge to protect the poor is paralleled in his poetry by the equally constant insistence, which Jeffrey notes, on broadening the perspective of his readers. In *The Borough*, for example, he asks -

Can scenes like these withdraw thee from thy wood,
Thy upland forest or thy valley's flood?

('General Description', 25-26)

He imagines his reader as a large landowner distanced from the crudity and bustle of town life. His question has a wry humour because, as we have seen, the majority of his readers, defiantly urban and middle-class, were concerned, if the reviewers can be regarded as representative, to distinguish themselves from the class and culture with which Crabbe here merges them. He implies that his readers are, in effect, as removed from and ignorant of the social environment he describes as the rural gentleman who sees the town as a haze in the distance, setting off the pastoral beauty and serenity of his estate -

from your upland paddock you look down,
And just perceive the smoke which hides the town;
When weary peasants at the close of day
Walk to their cots, and part upon the way;
When cattle slowly cross the shallow brook,
And shepherds pen their folds, and rest upon their crook.

(115-120)

The passage is more subtle in its implications than *The Village*, in which the bluff tone of defiance and challenge insists that the poet, and he alone, has escaped from a morally vacuous aesthetics. For the observer described here the smoke blends the town with the horizon so that it does not disturb the mellowness of the evening scene; it is, as Wordsworth put it, 'city smoke, by distance ruralised'.³⁶ The peasants' weariness

35. Compare Jeffrey's response to the characters of *The Borough* - 'Our sympathy with their enjoyments is enhanced by a certain mixture of pity for their general condition...while our concern for their sufferings is at once softened and endeared to us by the recollection of our own exemption from them' (ibid., p. 88).

36. *The Prelude* (1850), I, 89, in William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth, M.H. Abrams, and Stephen Gill (New York and London, 1979), p. 33. All quotations from *The Prelude* are from this edition.

seems to be required by an underlying natural rhythm which the poem imitates; the poem slows with the cattle and comes to rest with the shepherds. However, the perspective of the observer forms connections which are fortuitous only. The labourers' fatigue is due to hard work and not to a pervasive diurnal rhythm; the smoke disguises an alternative way of life. The aesthetic moment centres the world around the onlooker and reduces other lives to balancing rhythms. At least, and this is Crabbe's point, it has done so in poetry hitherto. From his elevated position of privilege, Crabbe implies, the landowner, who here symbolizes an entire culture,³⁷ needs to make an effort ('you look down / And *just* perceive') in order to see his landscape as incomplete. Crabbe intends to bring him closer to a larger world and to reveal his sense of harmony to be adventitious -

these half-buried buildings next the beach;
Where hang at open doors the net and cork,
While squalid sea-dames mend the meshy work;
Till comes the hour, when, fishing through the tide,
The weary husband throws his freight aside -
A living mass, which now demands the wife,
Th' alternate labours of their humble life.

(18-24)

The setting is similar - evening and the return home of a tired labourer - but it now evokes not only an observed landscape but a way of life. Because of this it is no longer under the observer's, in this case the poet's, control. Instead it is obtrusively untidy, disagreeable, irregular; it dictates its own emphases, so that the scene seems almost alien ('sea-dames'). Our attention shifts to and fro between wife and husband with a rhythm that is not determined by the prevailing mood of the observer. It is a disruptive and unsettling rhythm, continually coming to rest only to start up again as a new activity is described.

37. The analogy which Nigel Everett finds between late eighteenth-century landscape design and Gilpin's theory of picturesque composition in painting is apposite here. Everett summarizes Gilpin's theory in such a way as to emphasize the analogy -

[A] composition in painting must have a main subject which should catch the eye first, engage the attention by its dignity, and establish the tone of the 'whole', with the other parts being 'artificially' adapted to it. These parts - whether animals, people, landscape, or buildings - are 'appendages' that must correspond with, and rank in proper subordination to, the main subject.

(Nigel Everett, 'Country Justice: The Literatures of Landscape Improvement and English Conservatism, with particular reference to the 1790s', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge, 1977, p. 28).

The movement of 'th' alternate labours' will, we are convinced, continue even when the observer has moved on. The poet of *The Borough*, unlike the poet of *The Village*, concedes that the truth in its complex entirety eludes the structured forms of poetry. The coastal scene cannot be subsumed within an aesthetic detachment; it requires a response and judgment ('squalid', 'humble'), however inadequate.³⁸

Crabbe accurately gauged the strength of his readers' reliance on aspects of a culture which, in their response to *The Village*, they had agreed was obsolete. For instance, Robert Grant endeavoured to accommodate Crabbe's argument in *The Village* to the terms of early eighteenth-century theories of pastoral. He argued that Crabbe was justified in attacking pastoral only when it pretended to be an exact likeness of contemporary life; true poetry was a means of escape from the mundane world and should be recognized as such.³⁹ Conceptions of

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38. John Ogden has examined the growth of attention to distance in the eighteenth century, leading, for example, to philosophical treatises on the perception of distance and deeper perspectives in painting. David Hume argued in his *Treatise of Human Nature* that 'a very great distance encreases our esteem and admiration for an object'. Edmund Burke, in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, explained -

When danger or pain press too nearly, they are incapable of giving any delight, and are simply terrible; but at certain distances, and with certain modifications, they may be, and they are delightful, as we every day experience.

The aesthetic appeal of distance was summarized by Thomas Campbell in 'Pleasures of Hope' - 'Tis distance lends enchantment to the view'(7). (John T. Ogden, 'From Spatial to Aesthetic Distance in the Eighteenth Century', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 35, 1 (January-March, 1974), 63-78). Crabbe examines the moral and social implications of the aesthetic appeal of distance.

39. Robert Grant, *Quarterly Review*, 4 (November, 1810), 281-312; Pollard, pp. 118-121. In his preface to *Tales* Crabbe replied to Grant with an argument reminiscent of Jeffrey, an argument which, I have suggested, does less than justice to the poetry -

I must allow that the effect of Poetry should be to lift the mind from the painful realities of actual existence, from its every-day concerns, and its perpetually-occurring vexations, and to give it repose by substituting objects in their place which it may contemplate with some degree of interest and satisfaction: but what is there in all this, which may not be effected by a fair representation of existing character? nay, by a faithful delineation of those painful realities, those every-day concerns, and those perpetually-occurring vexations, provided they be not (which is hardly to be supposed) the very concerns of the Reader?

(ibid., p. 153)

pastoral in terms of fantasy survived by association with the theory of the sublime. Hildebrand Jacob, for instance, in an essay entitled 'How the mind is rais'd to the Sublime' published in 1735, describes 'Poetic Enthusiasm' in terms of the 'Fairy Way of Writing'.⁴⁰ Grant's criticism of Crabbe depends on ideas such as those developed by Richard Hurd in *A Dissertation on the Idea of Universal Poetry* (1766) -

[T]here is something in the mind of man, sublime and elevated, which prompts it to overlook all obvious and familiar appearances, and to feign to itself other and more extraordinary - such as correspond to the extent of its own powers, and fill out all the faculties and capacities of our souls. This restless and aspiring disposition poetry, first and principally, would indulge and flatter, and thence take its name of *divine*, as if some power above human conspired to lift the mind to these exalted conceptions.⁴¹

Grant insisted on poetry that encouraged and did not subvert the reader's illusions. Others argued in a similarly familiar manner that the material for poetry had to be carefully selected so as not to offend the reader.⁴²

This approach strangely echoes, and perhaps was provoked by, an antithesis which Crabbe had himself asserted between truth and poetry (*The Village*, I, 54). In *The Village* he attempts to obscure completely the distinction between himself as observer and himself as poet; he incorporates the credentials which earlier poets had confined to their prefaces into the poem itself -

cast by Fortune on a frowning coast,
Which neither groves nor happy valleys boast;
Where other cares than those the Muse relates,
And other shepherds dwell with other mates;
By such examples taught, I paint the Cot...

(I, 49-53)

In *The Parish Register*, similarly, he insists that the poem is a faithful representation of a village priest ruminating over the register, guided solely by his memory ('Baptisms', 1-14). Even Crabbe's notorious manner of 'writing poetry in the style and language of prose'⁴³ might be regarded as a polemical indication of the priority of his allegiances; he devotes

40. Quoted in Samuel H. Monk, *The Sublime* (New York, 1935), p. 61.

41. Elledge, II, pp. 862-863.

42. Pollard, pp. 157, 172-173, 186.

43. Unsigned review, *British Review*, 4 (October, 1812), 51-64; *ibid.*, p. 154.

more attention to his subject than to his reader.⁴⁴ One reviewer referred to, among other passages, the introduction to 'The Learned Boy' -

An honest man was Farmer Jones, and true,
He did by all as all by him should do;
Grave, cautious, careful, fond of gain was he,
Yet famed for rustic hospitality...

(1-4)

He then wrote -

What reader, unacquainted with Mr. Crabbe's previous reputation, would think of reading a single line more of an author who forces himself into his notice with such vulgar effrontery, and who thinks to gain by repelling him, like the beggar at the corner of the street who thrusts his stump of an arm into the passenger's face, in order to compel his attention and extort his alms? Who does not turn from the obtrusive mendicant in disgust, and escape his importunities if the swiftness of his feet will only enable him to elude them?⁴⁵

Yet Crabbe's language is that of a farming community which would regard the more ornate periods of poetry as frivolous; it signifies that blunt common sense which adapts Christianity to the requirements of profit and loss, compromising between 'rustic hospitality' and fondness of 'gain'. In a poem which examines the impact of urban culture on a farmer's son, Crabbe is concerned to stress the hiatus, extending to different uses of language, between the rural community and those who 'talk as if they read it from a book' (224), the hiatus which produced the response quoted above. Nevertheless, Crabbe's poetry is not quite recorded speech. To denigrate poetry while writing it was too coy a paradox for him to sustain; in *The Borough* he represents poetry more honestly as an interaction between

44. Ian Watt makes a similar point with respect to the novel when he writes -
[I]t would appear...that the function of language is much more referential in the novel than in other literary forms; that the genre itself works by exhaustive presentation rather than by elegant concentration. This fact would no doubt explain...why many undoubtedly great novelists...often write gracelessly...

(p. 30)

Since poetry was more bound by convention than the novel, Crabbe's 'prose style' was, in effect and perhaps in intention, more iconoclastic than the 'gracelessness' of novelists.

45. Unsigned review, *Critical Review*, 2 (December, 1812), 561-579; Pollard, p. 183.

the poet's powers of evocation and the reader's imagination ('General Description', 1-6).⁴⁶

As well as arguing on the basis of pastoral theory, Grant also put forward a more sophisticated criticism of Crabbe using the theory of the picturesque to which I alluded in the first chapter. Adducing the example of the Dutch school of painting, he argued that it was possible to portray 'low and even offensive subjects' in painting but not in poetry. Borrowing an argument from Du Fresnoy's *De Arte Graphica*, which Dryden had translated in 1695,⁴⁷ he explained that painting addresses the eye but poetry 'appeals to the mind'.⁴⁸ Richard Payne Knight, as we have seen, described the effect of painting similarly in the passage from *The Landscape* quoted in the last chapter. Knight glossed this passage by writing that 'Rembrandt, Ostade, Teniers, and others of the Dutch painters, have produced the most beautiful pictures, by the most exact imitations of the most ugly and disgusting objects in nature'.⁴⁹ The

46. In the preface to *Tales* Crabbe interprets this consensus in a manner derived also from early eighteenth-century pastoral theory; here he actually contradicts his earlier poetry -

Fiction itself, we know, and every work of fancy, must for a time have the effect of realities; nay, the very enchanters, spirits, and monsters of *Ariosto* and *Spenser* must be present in the mind of the Reader while he is engaged by their operations, or they would be as the objects and incidents of a Nursery Tale to a rational understanding, altogether despised and neglected: in truth, I can but consider this pleasant effect upon the mind of a Reader, as depending neither upon the events related (whether they be actual or imaginary), nor upon the characters introduced (whether taken from life or fancy), but upon the manner in which the Poem itself is conducted; let that be judiciously managed, and the occurrences actually copied from life will have the same happy effect as the inventions of a creative fancy; - while, on the other hand, the imaginary persons and incidents to which the Poet has given '*a local habitation, and a name*', will make upon the concurring feelings of the Reader, the same impressions with those taken from truth and nature, because they will appear to be derived from that source, and therefore of necessity will have a similar effect.

(ibid., pp. 153-154)

47. See Ker, II, p. 128.

48. Robert Grant, *Quarterly Review*, 4 (November, 1810), 281-312; ibid., p. 123.

49. Knight, p. 22. The Dutch poor were regarded as eminently vulgar (see, for example, Adam Smith, *Lectures on Jurisprudence*, edited by R.L. Meek, D.D. Raphael, and P.G. Stein (Oxford, 1978), p. 539).

picturesque effect, like pastoral, however, was possible for some only within certain limits. Though all critics who noted the analogy between Crabbe's poetry and the Dutch school of painting agreed that both were accurate in their respective representations of rural life, some, following Reynolds's distinction between the Dutch and Italian schools of painting,⁵⁰ argued that both were too indiscriminate in their choice of detail.⁵¹ Others thought that Crabbe only was indiscriminate.⁵² There were also those who argued that the accuracy of both excused their faulty taste.⁵³ Accuracy, however, was widely interpreted; both Goldsmith⁵⁴ and Mary Mitford⁵⁵ were also compared with Teniers. In any case, although the reviewers tended to reproduce Crabbe's antithesis of truth and taste, they failed to acknowledge its basis in the suggestion conveyed by his poetry that contemporary taste depended on an inherited mode of perception which, in the limits it imposed, was morally evasive.

Grant's protest may have been prompted in part by the rivalry which existed between the *Quarterly Review* and the *Edinburgh Review*, for Jeffrey had seven months earlier praised Crabbe's poetry for 'its mere truth and fidelity, and... the brevity and clearness with which he sets before his readers, objects and characters with which they have been all their days familiar'.⁵⁶ Whereas Jeffrey assumes that poetry should embody

50. *The Idler*, no. 79; 'The Idler' and 'The Adventurer', edited by W.J. Bate, John M. Bullitt, and L.F. Powell (New Haven and London, 1963), p. 247.

51. Pollard, pp. 64, 74, 108, 272, 276, 301.

52. Ibid., pp. 181-182, 242.

53. Ibid., pp. 85-86, 168, 284. Hazlitt attributed the growth of 'a taste for that sort of poetry, which leans for support on the truth and fidelity of its imitations of nature' to painting and dated its origins to about 1783, when *The Village* was published (ibid., p. 301). This is perhaps another instance of Crabbe's success in altering the popular conception of the history of poetry.

54. John Aikin, 'A Critical Dissertation', *The Poetical Works of Oliver Goldsmith* (1796); Rousseau, p. 234.

55. Unsigned review of *Our Village*; *Gentleman's Magazine*, 98, 2 (August, 1828), 143.

56. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 16 (April, 1810), 30-55; Pollard, pp. 85-86.

an acknowledged reality, Grant argues that it should present acceptable ideals. That these attitudes should be regarded as antagonistic rather than complementary is a further indication of the weakening of decorum; the real and the ideal are increasingly seen as distinct. William Edinger argues similarly that, for the proponents of the sublime and the pathetic, aesthetic pleasure began to oppose moral significance as the major evaluative criterion.⁵⁷ We have already noted that the moral and aesthetic senses began to diverge in eighteenth-century moral philosophy as poetic styles proliferated. Nevertheless, the concept of decorum rarely split completely in critical practice into the real, interpreted as empirically observed and morally significant detail, on the one hand, and the ideal, an illusory embodiment of desire, on the other. Attempts to accommodate both, even when defined in such antagonistic terms, as they tended to be by the minority of reviewers whose poetic theory was derived exclusively from ideas of the sublime or the pathetic, were still more common than attempts to isolate either.⁵⁸ Sentimental poetry, for example, though notable for its lack of circumstantial detail, was rarely valued because it was illusory; pity was never a mere synonym for pleasure and whatever pleasure was said to be associated with pity was usually given a moral justification.⁵⁹ Similarly the height of the of the sublime was rarely dissociated completely from high ideals interpreted morally. Perhaps the most impressive evidence that aestheticism did not become individualist to the extent of excluding moral concerns is the influence of the subjectivist theorist of beauty, Archibald Alison, on Jeffrey, the champion of moral consensus in literature.

57. Edinger, pp. 65-66, 71.

58. See, for example, Bate -

Whether it was applied to a virtual associative identification, or to an inner mechanical and mimetic conformity with an object or sound, or whether it revealed itself as merely a vague and frankly subjective outflow of sentiment, the development of the conception of sympathy may be cited as distinctively illustrating the manner in which empirical associationism befriended and combined with emotional intuitionism.

(pp. 147-148)

59. See A.O. Aldridge, 'The Pleasures of Pity', *ELH*, 16, 1 (March, 1949), 76-87. See also MacIntyre on the close connection between aestheticism and utilitarianism (pp. 60-62).

Although Edinger characterizes Alison's theory as 'unalloyed hedonism',⁶⁰ and 'critical solipsism',⁶¹ Alison, I think, resists the extreme subjectivism which Edinger imputes to him. He concludes his *Essays* by approving the doctrine that 'Matter is not beautiful in itself, but derives its Beauty from the Expression of MIND' but hesitates to admit that

MATTER is beautiful only, by being expressive of the proper Qualities of MIND, and that all the Beauty of the MATERIAL, as well as of the INTELLECTUAL World is to be found in Mind and its QUALITIES alone.⁶²

Instead Alison decides that beauty arises from that response of mental qualities to material qualities which is productive of emotion. This reciprocity is sufficiently objective to enable Jeffrey to formulate his 'law of nature',⁶³ within the context of Alison's associationist philosophy.

Grant's concept of poetry as illusion, 'the secret magic of association',⁶⁴ is therefore, perhaps, not as dissimilar to Jeffrey's 'law of nature' as it might at first appear. To keep awake in the mind a sense of the ideal Grant saw as a 'moral necessity',⁶⁵ so that, beneath appearances of misery and depravity, the social framework which made virtue possible might continue to be upheld -

Wherever the relations of civilized society exist, particularly where a high standard of morals, however imperfectly acted upon, is yet publicly recognized, a groundwork is laid for the exercise of all the charities social and domestic.⁶⁶

It was because Crabbe attended to superficial particularities rather than 'representations of general nature',⁶⁷ that Grant objected to his poetry. Although Grant was more attracted to the hedonistic implications of the sublime than Jeffrey, the opposition between them did not, it seems to me,

60. Edinger, p. 71.

61. Ibid., p. 113.

62. Alison, pp. 411-412.

63. See pp. 45-46.

64. Robert Grant, *Quarterly Review*, 4 (November, 1810), 281-312; Pollard, p. 118.

65. Id.

66. Ibid., p. 122.

67. Ibid., p. 128.

run very deep. Jeffrey also appealed to a standard of 'general nature', derived from civilized society; Crabbe's subjects could not depart from it to a great degree, he thought, without becoming disgusting -

The only sufferers...upon whom we cannot bear to look, are those that excite pain by their wretchedness, while they are too depraved to be the objects of affection, and too weak and insignificant to be the cause of misery to others, or, consequently, of indignation to the spectators. Such are the depraved, abject, diseased and neglected poor, - creatures in whom every thing amiable or respectable has been extinguished by sordid passions or brutal debauchery, - who have no means of doing the mischief of which they are capable, - whom every one despises, and no one can either love or fear. On the characters, the miseries, and the vices of such beings, we look with *disgust* merely: and, though it may perhaps serve some *moral* purpose, occasionally to set before us this humiliating spectacle of human nature sunk to utter worthlessness and insignificance, it is altogether in vain to think of exciting either pity or horror, by the truest and most forcible representations of their sufferings or of their enormities.⁶⁸

In support of his criticism Jeffrey cited, amongst other tales, 'a good part' of that of 'Peter Grimes'.⁶⁹ In this he was followed by many others.⁷⁰

Yet 'Peter Grimes' focuses as much upon responses to Grimes as upon the 'humiliating spectacle' of Grimes himself. Jeffrey is repelled by Grimes, as are the villagers. The pity and fear which he inspires in the villagers are not cathartic but hesitant and inappropriate. As Jeffrey recognizes, we feel his pain but cannot sympathize with it. The reader is carefully led to this point of identification with the villagers by Crabbe's method of narration. At the moments of crisis in the poem, when the murders, as we presume them to be, are committed, we are given a version of the truth by the narrator that is incomplete and a version by Grimes that is probably false; we are compelled, like the villagers, to guess and suspect. Even at the moments of revelation, in the alehouse at the beginning of the poem and in the workhouse at the end, we are similarly given the bare and distorted skeleton of a plot. We learn enough to explain Grimes's 'maudlin grief' (32) and 'strange disease' (224);

68. Ibid., p. 92. The review proved to be influential: see *ibid.*, pp. 143, 180-181.

69. Ibid., p. 93.

70. Ibid., pp. 114, 135, 138, 306-307.

like the villagers, we observe him 'feel a curse or meditate on crime' (246). Yet his motivation, his inner psychology, remains mysterious. We are awed by his agony but unenlightened by it.

The best recent interpretation of the poem ends with Jeffrey at this point. Peter New considers that the poem takes the reader 'to the boundaries of what we would consent to call "human"'.⁷¹ This formulation implies a different judgment of the poem from Jeffrey's in that New's reader agrees to be taken. Nevertheless, New shares with Jeffrey a recognition of the gulf separating Grimes and the reader. Yet we reach this point of agreement with the villagers by a strange path, for they have shown themselves capable of callous indifference to the mistreated apprentices (69-78) and taunting cruelty to Grimes himself (211-212). This has led one critic to argue that Grimes is merely 'acting out the ordinary assumptions of people' who have been brutalized by the apprenticeship system.⁷² This is an extreme and, in its elevation of a minor facet of the poem, I think, an unjustifiable reading. But the suggestion of a similarity between Grimes and the villagers points, it seems to me, to a deficiency in the readings of Jeffrey and New. When New comments on the line 'This known, some curious, some in pity went' (247) that 'it is clearly the latter we are invited to identify with',⁷³ he is expressing an unwarranted confidence. When we have been led to share the villagers' reserved pity, can we so readily dissociate ourselves from its darker aspects of indifference and superiority? Like 'Edward Shore', 'Peter Grimes' can be read as a confirmation of conventional social values. The rebel collapses under the strain of his isolation and falls foul of his own unorthodox doctrines; Grimes respects only force and cunning, a mode of behaviour too inhuman for him to sustain, and finally, in his insanity, he imagines that he is denied the pity he previously from a position of strength derided. Yet this reading fails to account for the ambivalent manner in which Crabbe presents the social values in the poem. A more complete interpretation would, I think,

71. New, p. 236.

72. Ronald B. Hatch, *Crabbe's Arabesque* (Montreal and London, 1976), p. 106.

73. New, p. 98.

acknowledge that, as with 'Edward Shore', Grimes's act of rebellion exposes the inadequacy of the rejected orthodoxy. Even at its best the moral code implemented by the villagers, their pity and their justice, only serves to reinforce Grimes's sense of isolation and exacerbate his guilty misanthropy. At its tormenting and vindictive worst it helps to drive him mad.

If, as I have suggested, Crabbe's poetry challenges the readiness of its readers to judge and to condemn, why is it so amenable to interpretations which concentrate solely on the vices it exposes? Crabbe's reputation as 'Censor of the Poor',⁷⁴ was and is widespread. One reviewer suggested that his poetry conveyed 'an impression of the hatefulness of man, with the effect of scarcely wishing, because not hoping, to make him by any efforts, better'.⁷⁵ Hazlitt wrote similarly that 'he blocks out all possibility of good, cancels the hope, or even the wish for it, as a weakness'.⁷⁶ The dominant theme of *The Village*, Raymond Williams argues, is that 'it is the "race" that errs, the "human condition"', which he describes as 'that glozing indifference to the reality of "varied fortune" against which, when it had appeared, in conventional pastoral modes, the poem had set out to act'.⁷⁷ Crabbe suggests in *The Parish Register*, according to John Barrell, that 'though we might well pity the labourer's hard life, it [is] unwise and even fraudulent to invite him to see himself as anything other than a labourer; we must reconcile him to his lot, not seek to change it'.⁷⁸

74. James Montgomery, *Eclectic Review*, 5 (January, 1809), 40-49; *ibid.*, p. 75. See the following passage -

[N]o malevolent disposition induced the author to expose the vicious habits, and loathsome manners of English rustics: would to God, that their habits were less vicious, and their manners less loathsome than they too often are!

(Unsigned review, *Oxford Review*, 3 (January, 1808), 87-96, p. 91).

75. Unsigned review, *Christian Observer*, 18 (October, 1819), 650-658; Pollard, p. 265.

76. William Hazlitt, *London Magazine*, 3 (May, 1821), 484-490; *ibid.*, p. 303.

77. *The Country and the City*, p. 95.

78. *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 78.

There is ample evidence for this kind of interpretation. As regards Crabbe's attitude to the education of the poor, for instance, it is apparent from the poetry that he recognized obedience and resignation as proper goals but not scepticism. The narrator often intervenes in the poems to make this point. In *The Parish Register* he criticizes those biblical commentators who

to doubt have rustic readers led;
Have made them stop to reason *why?* and *how?*
And, where they once agreed, to cavil now.
(*'Baptisms'*, 86-88)

Education was a means of social discipline -

To every class we have a school assign'd,
Rules for all ranks and food for every mind...
(*The Borough*, 'Schools', 1-2)

It was essential to restrain natural tendencies to vice; in one of the *Posthumous Tales* 'the untaught and ill-taught' are described as

Children of want and vice, inured to ill,
Unchain'd the passions, and uncurb'd the will.
(*'The Family of Love'*, 169-171)

The proper end of education, Crabbe evidently thought, was to reconcile the poor to their poverty.

These views were by no means exceptional. They belong to a social philosophy which would have been familiar to Crabbe's readers. In the 1790s Hannah More with her sisters set up schools around Cheddar in order to remove 'that great gulf which has divided the rich and poor'.⁷⁹ Similarly she distributed the Cheap Repository Tracts in order to acquaint the rich with the poor and to 'let the poor know that the rich have faults'.⁸⁰ Crabbe's aims in *The Village* were identical. But, as Hannah More wrote in 1823, 'instructions' were 'confined to the scriptures'; schemes in which it was proposed that the poor 'not only read English, but ancient history, and even the sciences' she regarded as having 'a revolutionary as well as irreligious tendency'.⁸¹ As Dr Johnson had written, 'some

79. Letter to the Rev. J. Newton (15 September, 1796); Roberts, II, p. 465.

80. Letter to Lady Olivia Sparrow (1813), quoted in M.G. Jones, *Hannah More* (Cambridge, 1952), p. 148.

81. Letter to William Wilberforce (1823); Roberts, IV, pp. 210-211, 213.

instruction...is necessary, and much perhaps may be dangerous'.⁸²

Crabbe's association with this ideology perhaps explains the opposition of readers such as Hazlitt. But it does not account for the criticism of the *Christian Observer* nor for the fact that Crabbe was hailed in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* as 'the Great Founder of the Radical School' of poetry.⁸³ Both Crabbe and Ebenezer Elliott, who wrote of Crabbe that 'if he had never lived, it is quite possible that I might never have written pauper-poetry',⁸⁴ were said to

probe the festering sore to the bottom; and tear away the veiling rags which, in our impatient selfishness, we are content to see interposed between the foul, eating ulcer and our daintiness; but this disgust is given only that the canker may be thoroughly exposed and examined, and skilfully salved. Neither of the Radical bards seems to give himself much concern whether his passionate representations of truth be what are conventionally considered fit for the purposes of poetry or not; contented if, by rousing, agitating, and affecting our feelings, they can awaken the torpid sense to the justice which society owes to its outcast, and its degraded and suffering members.⁸⁵

Crabbe, for some, purported to describe the natural meanness of human nature, which the poor, less familiar with Christian discipline than the higher classes, exhibited most clearly. For others he portrayed the brutalizing effects of an unjust society; to Elliott, for instance, Crabbe was important because he revealed 'the cause of our degradation'.⁸⁶

One reason for this confusion, I think, is that Crabbe did not keep, as one reader put it, 'the idea of independent poverty distinct from that

82. Review of Soame Jenyns, *A Free Inquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757), in *The Works of Samuel Johnson*, 11 vols (London, 1825), VI, p. 56. See M.G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement* (London, 1938), pp. 4-14, 73-84; Victor E. Neuburg, *Popular Education in Eighteenth Century England* (London, 1971), p. 10; J.M. Goldstrom, *The Social Content of Education 1808-1870* (Shannon, 1972), pp. 22-23.

83. 'The Radical Poets', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 8 (November, 1832), 137-160, p. 137.

84. Preface to *The Village Patriarch*, in *The Poetical Works of Ebenezer Elliott*, p. 55.

85. 'The Radical Poets', p. 140.

86. Ebenezer Elliott, 'A Defence of Modern Poetry', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 7 (April, 1840), 309-314, p. 309.

of pauperism, and notions of the condition of an industrious country cottager distinct from those of the condition of a poor town-alley lodger'.⁸⁷ A justification often put forward for the Anglican educational movement was that contentment and well-being were the inevitable result of the virtues it was intended to inculcate. Bishop Watson, in fact, read this lesson in the system of property, divinely ordained so 'that the industrious might enjoy the rewards of their diligence; and that those who would not work, might feel the punishment of their laziness'.⁸⁸ As we have seen, Crabbe drew a similar distinction in *The Parish Register* between the industrious and the idle poor. Yet *The Parish Register* also contains the popular portrait of the 'noble Peasant, Isaac Ashford' ('Burials', 414), a passage which will serve as a convenient illustration of the ambivalence of much of Crabbe's poetry. On one level this tale of an industrious and virtuous labourer, reconciling himself in his old age to the workhouse but dying before he finally enters it, presents an exemplary model of 'a wise good man contented to be poor' (502); Crabbe distinguishes between that pride prompted by envy, which seeks to deride and blame others more fortunate for the existence of poverty and misery, and Isaac's pride in his ability to devote himself to his duty and resign himself to his fate. The tale was reprinted in the *Cottager's Monthly Visitor*,⁸⁹ a magazine written for the poor and intended to 'afford rational employment for the mind, and thus draw it from foolish and sinful pursuits'.⁹⁰ Clearly, however, the reward of virtue in this case is not well-being but the workhouse; Isaac resigns himself to an injustice, describing the overseer as one 'who gains his plenty by the sons of need' (478). The tale would have brought to the minds of most readers as an ironic subtext the well-known description of

87. Thomas Maude, preface to *The School Boy* (London, 1836), pp. iv-v.

88. Richard Watson, *A Sermon Preached before the Stewards of the Westminster Dispensary*, second edition (London, 1793), p. 3.

89. *Cottager's Monthly Visitor*, 5 (March, 1825), 137-138.

90. 'Introductory Address', *Cottager's Monthly Visitor*, 1 (February, 1821), p. 4.

the workhouse in *The Village* (I, 228-249).⁹¹ Crabbe, indeed, repeats one of the verses.⁹² In *The Village* the pride which Crabbe extols in Isaac Ashford is compromised by the 'strong compulsion' of need and 'embitters that it can't deny' (I, 247, 249). Isaac escapes this fate only by dying suddenly.

In *The Village Patriarch* Elliott presents

the description of a man, poor, blind, and old, a man of five-score years, of his person, his recollections, his sensations, walks, talks, dreams, and death; death which, as the bailiffs invade his cottage, and the workhouse opens its doors, sets free 'the last of England's high-soul'd poor'.⁹³

It is evident from this summary that the poem is indebted to the portrait of Isaac Ashford. Yet Elliott recommends not resigned acceptance but

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91. The passage was reprinted in *Elegant Extracts*, in the *Annual Register*, 26 (1783), 183-189 (where Wordsworth and Scott first read it: *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth: The Later Years, Part II, 1829-1834*, edited by Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, revised by Alan Hill (Oxford, 1979), p. 691), and in the *Britannic Magazine*, 2 (1794), 399-400. Francis Jeffrey wrote of 'unpoetical acquaintances who declared they could never pass by a parish workhouse, without thinking of the description of it they had read at school in the Poetical Extracts' (*Edinburgh Review*, 12 (April, 1808), 131-151; Pollard, p. 55). J.G. Lockhart ascribed 'the vulgar impression that Crabbe is throughout a gloomy author' to

the choice of certain specimens of his earliest poetry in the 'Elegant Extracts' - the only specimens of his that had been at all generally known at the time when most of those who have criticized his later works were young. That exquisitely-finished, but heart-sickening description, in particular, of the poor-house in *The Village*, fixed itself on every imagination...

(*Quarterly Review*, 50 (January, 1834), 468-508; *ibid.*, pp.317-318) For one reader, at least, such poetry was almost seditious. Edward Copleston, Professor of Poetry at Oxford in 1802 and later Bishop of Llandaff and Dean of St Paul's, complained in a letter to Peel published in 1819 of the

querulous sensibility, fostered by somber descriptions, in verse and prose, of Workhouses and Village Poor, which tends only to breed discontent, and to propagate the most erroneous notions of the duty of Government, and the defects of civil institutions.

(Quoted in Soloway, p. 140)

92. Compare line 246 of *The Village*, Book I ('Whose laws indeed for ruin'd age provide') with lines 471 to 472 of *The Parish Register*, 'Burials' ('Kind are your laws, ('tis not to be denied),/ That in yon house, for ruin'd age, provide').
93. 'The Poor and their Poetry', *Monthly Repository*, 6 n.s., 63 (March, 1832), 189-201, p.198.

angry denunciation -

Shall I, lost Britain! give the pest a name
That, like a cancer, eats into thy core?
'Tis Avarice, hungry as devouring flame;
But, swallowing all, it hungers as before...
Willing to wallow in your pomp, like swine,
Why do ye wear the human form divine?
Can ye make men of brutes, contemn'd, enslav'd?
(Book IX, XI, 296-299, 304-306)

For some readers, Crabbe's poetry, in revealing the degradation of human nature, provided a cause and context.

In fact, the middle-class orthodoxy which many have found and some resented in Crabbe's poetry seems to me to be, when the poetry is most convincing, little more than an inadequate shield against a rebellious and debilitating despair or a foil to a sceptical sense of humour. His poetry lacks a satisfying moral centre; Crabbe was never able to dramatize positive moral values convincingly. The directions which Crabbe as commentator gives to his readers Crabbe as narrator, as we have seen, often fails to support, undermines or even contradicts. In response to criticism, such as Grant's, he would make concessions, as in the preface to *Tales*, which compromised his poetry. Crabbe's social position as the son of a warehouse-keeper who had risen through patronage was always uneasy. There is evidence in poems such as 'The World of Dreams' that his orthodox opinions on the poor were rationalizations of fear -

Where? where? - am I reduced to this -
Thus sunk in poverty extreme?
Can I not these vile things dismiss?
No! they are things that more than seem:
This room with that cross-parting beam
Holds yonder squalid tribe and me -
But they were ever thus, nor dream
Of being wealthy, favour'd, free!
(257-264)

The workhouse is a potent symbol for misery in Crabbe's poetry; it levels social and moral distinctions. In this passage those distinctions exist only on the level of caricature; the poor are pictured as degenerate, uncivilized, devoid of imagination. Yet Crabbe in the poem never acknowledges this to be caricature. He imitates Jeffrey's disgust -

Wretches! if ye were only poor,
You would my sympathy engage;
Or were ye vicious, and no more,
I might be fill'd with manly rage;
Or had ye patience, wise and sage

We might such worthy sufferers call:
 But ye are birds that suit your cage -
 Poor, vile, impatient, worthless all!
 (273-280)

The sweeping denunciation belies the pretence at discrimination. Crabbe lacks Jeffrey's confident assumption of superiority -

Shall I a coat and badge receive,
 And sit among these crippled men...
 (265-266)

The recognition that orthodoxy is a denial of his own experience, as a poor man himself in his youth, he attempts to repress in favour of assertions of his uniqueness which will both justify and confirm his escape from poverty. Crabbe was torn between his memory and his desire.⁹⁴

He knew what was required of him and what he required of himself but often admitted a failure to meet these requirements -

I am convinced that instructing Ignorance and correcting Vice are not my Talents, at least they do not suit my Turn of Mind and Temper. God forgive me! I am disgusted where I should pity, and want to run away from the Object who expects from me Consolation and Sympathy.⁹⁵

'The rules of propriety and good manners' and the 'precepts of morality and religion',⁹⁶ which Crabbe intended to respect in his poetry, those abstractions - Ignorance, Vice, Consolation, Sympathy - which served to obscure 'crippled men', were shown, in 'Peter Grimes', for example, to undergo strange transformations in the crucible of daily life. In an extraordinary entry in his journal for 21 July, 1817, he describes an image which had occurred to him in a dream and which often surfaced in his poetry also, the hidden face of civilized society -

94. Patrick Cruttwell has described this poem as a 'phantasmagoria of the whole of Crabbe's essential life' -

There is a feeling of desperate insecurity, a haunting conviction of being out of his proper place, made stronger and stronger in proportion as he advances with more and more triumphs into the worlds of social elegance and success. There is a reluctant fascination with the squalid and horrible, which nevertheless terrify and repel.

('The Last Augustan', *Hudson Review*, 7, 4 (Winter, 1955), 533-534, p. 541).

95. Letter to Elizabeth Charter (11 November, 1815); A.M. Broadley and W. Jerrold, *The Romance of an Elderly Poet* (London, 1913), p. 110.

96. Preface to *Tales*, Pollard, p. 154.

Awake, I had been with the high, the apparently happy: we were very pleasantly engaged, and my last thoughts were cheerful. Asleep, all the misery and degradation, not my own only, but of those who had been. - That horrible image of servility and baseness - that mercenary and commercial manner! It is a work of imagination, I suppose, but it is very strange.⁹⁷

At best in his poetry Crabbe questioned rules and precepts, though with an undirected scepticism; at worst he aggressively insisted on them as the only means of inhibiting what he regarded as the human tendency to self-destruction.⁹⁸

It is still fashionable to describe Crabbe as 'the last Augustan',⁹⁹ a characterization which, in terms of broad generalities, has some validity. However, it is perhaps more accurate to emphasize Crabbe's affinity with Johnson¹⁰⁰ or with the later eighteenth-century poets, a comparison his contemporaries recognized,¹⁰¹ than with the satire of Pope. His heroic couplets do not attempt to dramatize a witty conversationalist, charming his readers into imagining themselves part of a select coterie; instead they serve to disguise the poet's personality and to distance the reader. Crabbe's denigration of poetic 'fancy' in the introduction to *The Borough* ('General Description', 1-5) as the faculty which reveals the poet's failure to record reality belongs to the tradition of the 'arts of delusion'. His poetry wears the mask of reality so well that it

97. Broadley and Jerrold, p. 175. Howard Mills dates 'The World of Dreams' c.1817 (George Crabbe, *Tales, 1812 and Other Selected Poems* (Cambridge, 1967), p. viii) but Ward places it in 1812 or 1813.

98. There is considerable substance in Hazlitt's observation that Crabbe is 'a Malthus turned metrical romancer' (Pollard, p. 302). Malthus, like Crabbe, regarded morality as a necessary (though inadequate) restraining influence on destructive tendencies and, like Crabbe, he thought that self-discipline was weaker in the poor than in the higher classes (see T.R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population*, second edition (London, 1803), pp. 483-493).

99. See, for example, Beth Nelson, *George Crabbe and the Progress of Eighteenth-century Narrative Verse* (Lewisburg, 1976), p. 13.

100. See John Speirs, *Poetry Towards Novel* (London, 1971), p. 153.

101. See, for example, Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 12 (April, 1808), 131-151; Pollard, pp. 55-56.

presents itself as reality wearing the mask of poetry, an obstruction which is merely the result of weakness. The ideal to which the poetry defers is observed truth with the emphasis placed firmly on accuracy rather than observation. It was this emphasis that distinguished him from modern poets such as Wordsworth who valued him more as a social historian than as a poet,¹⁰² insisting that his poetry lacked the clarifying 'light of imagination'.¹⁰³ John Wilson analyzed the distinction well; of Wordsworth he wrote that

in the midst of his pictures his own presence is felt. And his reader does not go on, without feeling himself bound continually in dearer love to him who has opened up for him the secrets of his own spirit, without recognizing in himself the enlarging capacity, the growing power, the unfolding sensibilities, into which a strong sympathy has infused new energies of life...

As to Crabbe, if we believe, it is often just what we try not to do. He gives us a picture of reality, which repels our belief while it commands it.¹⁰⁴

In a notebook entry of 1805, later incorporated in *Biographia Literaria*,¹⁰⁵ Coleridge argued that contemporary poets had reversed the priorities of earlier poetry by neglecting diction in favour of incident -

In the present age the Poet proposes to himself as his main Object & most characteristic of his art, new and striking Images, incidents that interest the Affections or excite the curiosity of the Reader; and both his characters and his descriptions he individualizes and specifies as much as possible, even to a degree of Portraiture / Meanwhile in his diction and metre he is often careless (W. Scott) or adopts some mechanical measure, of which one couplet or stanza is an adequate specimen... Now in the polished elder poets, especially of Italy, all is reversed...their thoughts seldom novel or very striking, while in a faulty extreme they placed the essence of

102. Ibid., pp. 290-293.

103. *Memoir and Letters of Sara Coleridge*, edited by E. Coleridge, 2 vols (London, 1873), I, p. 75.

104. John Wilson, 'Preface to A Review of the Chronicles of the Canongate', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 22 (November, 1827), 537-540; Pollard, pp. 311-312.

105. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, edited by George Watson, third edition (London, 1975), pp. 181-184.

Poetry in the *art* of Poetry, that is, in the exquisite polish of the Diction with perfect simplicity, equally avoiding every word which a man of rank would not use in common conversation, and every phrase which none but a bookish man would use...¹⁰⁶

Coleridge's remarks are applicable to the trend in eighteenth-century poetry towards a greater particularity of description and characterization and greater harshness of diction and irregularity of form. Yet his division of poetry into incident, on the one hand, and diction, on the other, is perhaps another consequence of the very tendency which he identifies, for this apparent isolation of incident is often, in Crabbe's poetry at least, an effect of the seemingly careless style. Crabbe's prosaism helped to make his description seem more accurate -

His versification...is frequently harsh and heavy, and his diction flat and prosaic; - both seeming to be altogether neglected in his zeal for the accuracy and complete rendering of his conceptions.¹⁰⁷

In Crabbe's poetry regularity of style is presented as antithetical to the variety and particularity of the real world -

Can measured lines these various buildings show,
The Town-Hall Turning, or the Prospect Row?
(*The Borough*, 'General Description', 11-12)

In the Preface to *The Borough* Crabbe describes the 'residing burgess' as 'an imaginary personage', introduced so that

the reader is in some degree kept from view of any particular place, nor will he perhaps be so likely to determine where those persons reside, and what their connexions, who are so intimately known to this man of straw.¹⁰⁸

Just as Crabbe invented his 'burgess' as a transparent disguise for himself, a small fiction that, in fact, only serves to emphasize Crabbe's pedantic accuracy ('the inhabitant of a village, in the centre of the kingdom, could not appear in the character of a residing burgess in a large sea-port'),¹⁰⁹ so his poetic style is an obvious ordering of irregular reality

106. *The Notebooks of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by Kathleen Coburn (London, 1957-), II (1962), 2599.17.159.

107. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 20 (November, 1812), 277-305; Pollard, p. 171.

108. Ward, I, p. 268.

109. Id.

and its artificial tidiness is never intended to suspend disbelief. Its most dominant characteristic is its apparent endlessness, as if to stress that any conclusion which might give shape to the succession of detail is arbitrary and falsely reassuring -

There stands a cottage with an open door,
 Its garden undefended blooms before:
 Her wheel is still, and overturn'd her stool,
 While the lone widow seeks the neighb'ring pool.
 This gives us hope all views of town to shun -
 No! here are tokens of the sailor-son;
 That old blue jacket, and that shirt of check,
 And silken kerchief for the seaman's neck;
 Sea-spoils and shells from many a distant shore,
 And furry robe from frozen Labrador.

(135-144)

Crabbe's verse is striking for the relentless monotony with which expectations of regularity and propriety are revealed to be escapist and inimical to truth because they can only be satisfied by 'shunning' whatever is unpleasant. We recognize, in Crabbe's dramatization of the 'burgess' introducing a country squire to unfamiliar scenes, a paradigm of the relationship between author and reader implicit in Crabbe's poetry. The coastal borough remained unfamiliar to Crabbe's contemporaries, at once, in Wilson's words, repelling and commanding belief, because, as we noted earlier, it was not amenable to a conventional mode of perception. Crabbe's concentration on the unfamiliar in order to expose the inadequacies of the familiar is undoubtedly an important connection with the poetry of his major contemporaries. Yet what is most puzzling about Crabbe is his readiness to undo the effect of his own poetry. However arbitrary Crabbe's intervention at the end of the first letter ('General Description') of *The Borough*, for example, and however false the reassurance he offers, his conclusion would nevertheless have proved irresistibly seductive to most of his contemporary readers -

Thus shall you something of our BOROUGH know,
 Far as a verse, with Fancy's aid, can show;
 Of sea or river, of a quay or street,
 The best description must be incomplete;
 But when a happier theme [succeeds], and when
 Men are our subjects and the deeds of men;
 Then may we find the Muse in happier style,
 And we may sometimes sigh and sometimes smile.

(295-302)

Crabbe seeks to relieve the reader of the entire burden which the poem's

stylistic inadequacy imposes by ascribing it solely to the impossibility of accurate description (as opposed, that is, to the impossibility of the reader's expectations) and, moreover, he endorses the idea of the average as a basis of good poetry ('we may sometimes sigh and sometimes smile'), an idea which, as we have seen, was one of the favourite weapons of his critics.

Crabbe's own responses, when they were most evident in his poems, tended to encourage the reader to reject his poetry at its most disturbing. And when Jeffrey praised him as one of 'the worthy supporters of the old poetical establishment' in the hope that he would 'come in time to surpass the revolutionists',¹¹⁰ he was endorsing Crabbe's poetry at its most conventional and familiar. What distinguishes Crabbe from similarly impersonal predecessors such as Churchill is that we cannot be sure how far his impersonality stemmed from faith in an ultimate consensus of interest and experience between poet and reader and how far it reflected a purely temperamental reticence. Perhaps Crabbe lacked Wordsworth's distrust of consensus so that he did not feel any need to introduce his readers to a peculiar sensibility of his own. Perhaps, on the other hand, his own distrust was less powerful than a fear of social isolation which made him unwilling to offend.

110. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 12 (April, 1808), 131-151, p. 151.

Chapter 5

William Cowper

We are come to town, but Mrs Garrick talks much of the charms of the country, where I think she has acted her winter pastoral rather too long; for the cold is so intense, that the best pleasure I have found for a long time, is to sit over a great fire and read Cowper's Poems... I have hardly the courage to stir, and have refused several invitations out of pity to man and beast...

(Letter from Hannah More to her sister, February, 1786)

'It would hardly be imagined', wrote Alexander Knox in 1796, 'that there could be anything very interesting in the appearance of a boor going from his cottage at peep of day to hew timber in a neighbouring wood'.¹ Knox was referring to the following passage from *The Task* -

Forth goes the woodman, leaving unconcern'd
The cheerful haunts of man; to wield the axe
And drive the wedge, in yonder forest drear,
From morn to eve his solitary task.
Shaggy, and lean, and shrewd, with pointed ears
And tail cropp'd short, half lurcher and half cur -
His dog attends him. Close behind his heel
Now creeps he slow; and now, with many a frisk
Wide-scamp'ring, snatches up the drifted snow
With iv'ry teeth, or ploughs it with his snout;
Then shakes his powder'd coat, and barks for joy.
Heedless of all his pranks, the sturdy churl
Moves right toward the mark; nor stops for aught,
But now and then with pressure of his thumb
T'adjust the fragrant charge of a short tube
That fumes beneath his nose; the trailing cloud
Streams far behind him, scenting all the air.
(V, 41-57)²

In fact, the passage is remarkable in a number of ways. Just as romance imagery of a knight-errant and his attendant hover over the description of

1. Alexander Knox, *The Flapper*, 34 (28 May, 1796); Elledge, II, p. 1112.

2. William Cowper, *Poetical Works*, edited by H.S. Milford, fourth edition, revised by Norma Russell (London, 1967), p. 201. All quotations from Cowper's poetry are from this edition.

the woodman and his dog, so the Miltonic formality of eighteenth-century blank verse stiffens the generally colloquial style. The incongruities that result are disconcertingly amusing in a way that precludes resolution, for it is by no means clear that any of the juxtaposed styles or genres is depreciated by the juxtaposition. When a compound ('wide-scamp'ring') or a periphrasis ('T'adjust the fragrant charge of a short tube') occurs, for example, the effect is comic but not unequivocally satirical.

The occasional hint of Gothic grandiloquence in the language ('The cheerful haunts of man', 'yonder forest drear'), the sense of heroic resolve ('Forth goes the woodman') and steadfast application ('the sturdy churl / Moves right toward the mark') are inappropriate to the event described, a mechanical, daily task - so mechanical, in fact, that the woodman shows few signs of being anything more than an automaton. The dog, with its vivacity, seems to monopolize the human qualities and the verse with which it is described is correspondingly energetic, varied and capricious in its pauses and rhythms. The woodman, in dramatic and comic contrast, remains an object, unyielding to the observer, whose concentration on the pipe serves, because of the unnaturally precise scrutiny of an inconsequential detail, merely to render the woodman even more alien. Yet the humanness of the woodman survives the comedy and it is the pipe which finally brings him into being for the reader. With the aid of 'the trailing cloud' we can picture him in the distance and reconstruct his journey. The 'scent' of smoke connects him with the observer and hence with us. The word 'scenting' itself creates a sense of distance, over which the pungency of tobacco smoke has been muted. The passage comes to life in the apparently insignificant detail and in the accurate but prosaic word, such as 'scamp'ring', which refuses to become elegant. When it approaches the conventional, the passage verges on the burlesque but it is then uncertain whether the poetry or the subject is being mocked.

It is a fragile achievement, threatening always to collapse into mock-heroic posturing or condescending parody. In the mock-heroic tradition Cowper's tone preserves between the diction and the subject a comic tension which exposes excess - the obsessive concentration of the woodman, the fascination of the observer. We are prepared to acknowledge as comic the discrepancy between the woodman's aura of resolution and his mundane occupation, while at the same time suspecting the observer's intentions.

A tension counterbalancing the suspected satire is set up within the language itself, between the different kinds of diction, as if the poet were struggling within the constraints of a tradition that hindered him from describing an ordinary event and pressured him towards exaggeration. The ensuing uncertainty restrains the tendency towards parody and creates the sense of a real encounter.

Knox went on to write that 'from this familiar circumstance Cowper has formed a poetic sketch which it is scarcely possible to read without being delighted'.³ The tone of surprise is common to most of the contemporary responses to Cowper's poetry. In fact, the critical comment is, on the whole, fairly uniform; one passage by Francis Jeffrey may serve to represent its general tenor -

[H]e passed from the imitation of poets, to the imitation of nature, and ventured boldly upon the representation of objects that had not been sanctified by the description of any of his predecessors. In the ordinary occupations and duties of domestic life, and the consequences of modern manners, in the common scenery of a rustic situation, and the obvious contemplation of our public institutions, he has found a multitude of subjects for ridicule and reflection, for pathetic and picturesque description, for moral declamation, and devotional rapture, that would have been looked upon with disdain, or with despair, by most of our poetical adventurers. He took as wide a range in language too, as in matter; and, shaking off the tawdry incumbrance of that poetical diction which had nearly reduced the art to the skilful collocation of a set of appropriated phrases, he made no scruple to set down in verse every expression that would have been admitted in prose, and to take advantage of all the varieties with which our language could supply him.⁴

That Cowper's choice of subject was novel was a comment made elsewhere by, amongst others, Leigh Hunt, who described him as 'the most correctly original' of poets.⁵ More usually, and more contentiously, attention was focused on his use of language. By those who approved it was described as

3. Elledge, II, p. 1112.

4. Francis Jeffrey, review of William Hayley, *The Life and Posthumous Writings of William Cowper* (1803), *Edinburgh Review*, 2, 3 (April, 1803), 64-86, p. 81.

5. Leigh Hunt, *Wit and Humour, Selected from the English Poets* (1846); Rousseau, p. 321.

'intentional ruggedness'⁶ and 'strong rough raciness'.⁷ Others wrote of 'familiar and often vulgar language...licentious pauses and rough unmeasured cadences'.⁸ Yet all agreed in stressing his originality.

This uniformity of attention, if not of evaluation, may have been facilitated by the fact that it corresponded with Cowper's image of himself as a poet, expressed in his letters; ten collections of his letters were printed between 1803 and 1827.⁹ Jeffrey referred to Cowper's correspondence in order to stress that 'the occasional harshness and inelegance of his versification' were not 'the effect of negligence merely'.¹⁰ To William Unwin Cowper wrote -

I reckon it among my principal advantages as a composer of verses, that I have not read an English poet these thirteen years, and but One these twenty years. Imitation even of the best models is my Aversion. It is servile and mechanical, a trick that has enabled many to usurp the name of Author, who could not have written at all, if they had not written upon the pattern of some body indeed original.¹¹

While writing *The Task* in 1783, he wrote to Joseph Hill -

Poetry, English poetry, I never touch, being pretty much addicted to the writing of it, and knowing that much intercourse with those gentlemen betrays us unavoidably into a habit of imitation, which I hate and despise most cordially.¹²

To his publisher, Joseph Johnson, he wrote -

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6. Unsigned review of George Crabbe, *Poetical Works* (1834), *Gentleman's Magazine*, 2 n.s. (December, 1834), 563-575; Pollard, p. 340.
 7. John Wilson, review of William Lisle Bowles, *Days Departed; or, Banwell Hill* (1828), in *The Works of Professor Wilson*, edited by Professor Ferrier, 12 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1855-1858), V (1856), pp. 347-386, p. 360.
 8. Unsigned review of William Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 3 (1815), *Monthly Review*, 79 (March, 1816), 296-310, p. 303.
 9. Norma Russell, *A Bibliography of William Cowper to 1837* (Oxford, 1963), pp. 201-205.
 10. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 2, 3 (April, 1803), 64-86, p. 83.
 11. Letter to William Unwin (24 November, 1781), in *The Letters and Prose Writings of William Cowper*, edited by James King and Charles Ryskamp (Oxford, 1979-), I (1979), p. 542.
 12. Letter to Joseph Hill (23 November, 1783); *ibid.*, II (1981), p. 183.

Give me a manly rough line, with a deal of meaning in it, rather than a whole poem full of musical periods, that have nothing but their oily smoothness to recommend them.¹³

This final passage is part of a letter of complaint to Johnson, who had attempted to correct what he had thought was a faulty line in *The Task*; Cowper suspected that Johnson 'was not qualified to relish blank verse'.¹⁴

Cowper's reputation rested on *The Task*. In 1785, when the poem was published, and for many years afterwards, blank verse was not a popular verse form for any but the most elevated subjects. As late as 1846 Leigh Hunt referred to *The Task* as 'another hopeless instance of the inefficacy of blank-verse in artless composition'.¹⁵ Dr Johnson had written that

if blank verse be not tumid and gorgeous, it is crippled prose; and familiar images in laboured language have nothing to recommend them but absurd novelty, which, wanting the attractions of nature, cannot please long.¹⁶

The georgic was now irredeemably out of favour and though georgics were still written, they usually met with the kind of incomprehension with which Southey greeted James Grahame's *British Georgics* (1809) -

[W]hen didactic verse is elevated into didactic poetry, the fitness of this species of composition may reasonably be doubted. If, for instance, as in the poem before us, the subject be agricultural, who is to profit by it? To the man who is already an agriculturist its instructions are superfluous; to him who purposes to become one they are necessarily insufficient; to any one else they are useless... These things cannot be made poetical; they may be translated into phrase ornate, and moulded into grandiloquous metre; yet the matter remains the same: - however like a gentleman you may toss the dung about, still it is dung that you are tossing.¹⁷

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13. Letter to Joseph Johnson [1784]; Wright, II, p. 286. This passage was quoted by Francis Jeffrey in the *Edinburgh Review*, 2, 3 (April, 1803), 64-86, p. 83 and in another review of Hayley's *Life* as an explanation of the fact that Cowper's poetry was 'frequently feeble, careless, and inharmonious' (*British Critic*, 22 (July, 1803), 55-63, p. 58).
 14. Letter to Walter Bagot (18 March, 1791); Wright, IV, p. 44.
 15. Leigh Hunt, *Wit and Humour*; Rousseau, p. 321.
 16. 'Life of Somerville'; Hill, II, pp. 319-320. See also Harvey, pp. 45-47.
 17. Robert Southey, review of James Grahame, *British Georgics* (1809), *Quarterly Review*, 3, 6 (May, 1810), 456-461, p. 456.

Of the georgic passage in Book III of *The Task* concerning the growth of cucumbers and the greenhouse Alexander Knox wrote -

A severe critic might...accuse Cowper of dwelling in a few instances on subjects scarcely worthy of his pen, and I own I myself could wish that his love for gardening had permitted him to be less exact in describing the apparatus for a hotbed.¹⁸

These criticisms, and in particular Southey's revision of Addison, support Coleridge's argument that incident was now regarded as more fundamental to poetry than style.¹⁹

However, the critical response to Cowper's poetry cannot be fully explained by reference to his letters or to outmoded or unpopular verse forms. He was generally thought to have introduced an entirely new mode of poetry. Sometimes with Burns²⁰ and sometimes alone,²¹ he was regarded as the progenitor of the modern school of poetry, by which critics usually meant what became known as the Lake school. Wordsworth himself acknowledged a debt to Burns and Cowper for counteracting 'the mischievous influence of Darwin's dazzling manner, the extravagance of the earlier dramas of

18. Alexander Knox, *The Flapper*, 38 (11 June, 1796); Elledge, II, pp. 1115-1121, p. 1121.

19. See pp. 130-131.

20. See, for example, the unsigned review of Robert Southey, *Madoc* (1806), *General Review*, 1, 6 (June, 1806), 505-526, p. 509; the unsigned review of James Hurdis, *Poems* (1808), *Retrospective Review*, 1 (1820), 57-69, p. 57.

21. See, for example, the unsigned review of Robert Southey, *Poems*, vol. 2 (1799), *Monthly Review*, 31 n.s. (March, 1800), 261-267, p. 262; unsigned review of Robert Southey, *A Tale of Paraguay* (1825), *Eclectic Review*, 42 (1825), 328-337, in *Robert Southey: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Lionel Madden (London, 1972), p. 325; unsigned review of John Clare, *The Shepherd's Calendar* (1827), *Eclectic Review*, 27 n.s. (June, 1827), 509-521, p. 511; unsigned review of Thomas Taylor, *The Life of William Cowper* (1833), *British Critic*, 14 (July, 1833), 26-45, p. 44; James Montgomery, 'Introductory Essay', William Cowper, *Poems* (Glasgow, 1824), pp. xxvi-xxvii; Thomas De Quincey, *Collected Writings*, edited by D. Masson, 14 vols (Edinburgh, 1889-1890), II (1889), p. 173.

Schiller, and that of other German writers'.²² Here I wish to concentrate on his influence on poetic strategy. At the beginning of this chapter we noticed how Cowper's poetry imbued apparently insignificant details with meaning. This was a practice which Wordsworth was to make famous and it called for a new kind of reader, one less ready to direct his attention according to preconceived ideas of propriety. As we have seen, aesthetic and social propriety were, ultimately, inseparable concepts and it is not fortuitous that a new emphasis on 'the minuter distinctions',²³ once excluded from poetry should be accompanied by a greater interest in depicting the poor and the outcast as individuals interesting in their own right.

The line of influence from Cowper to Wordsworth may be traced by using as an example the 'crazy Kate' passage, to which Wordsworth's 'The Thorn' and Southey's 'The Mad Woman', published in the second volume of his *Annual Anthology*,²⁴ bear similarities -

There often wanders one, whom better days
Saw better clad, in cloak of satin trimm'd
With lace, and hat with splendid ribband bound.
A serving maid was she, and fell in love
With one who left her, went to sea, and died.
Her fancy follow'd him through foaming waves
To distant shores; and she would sit and weep
At what a sailor suffers; fancy, too,
Delusive most where warmest wishes are,
Would oft anticipate his glad return,
And dream of transports she was not to know.

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22. Note written by Wordsworth in 1842 on MS of 'At the Grave of Burns' and 'Thoughts suggested the day following', in *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 5 vols (Oxford, 1940-1954), vol. 1, edited by Ernest de Selincourt (1940), vol. 2, edited by Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, revised by Helen Darbishire (1952), vol. 3, edited by Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, second edition (1954), vols 4-5, edited by Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire (1947-1949), II (1952), pp. 441-442. Mary Jacobus has suggested that Cowper is the most important influence on the blank verse of 'Tintern Abbey' and likewise Burns on the lyrics (*Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads' (1798)* (Oxford, 1976), p. 90).
23. Samuel Johnson, *The Rambler*, no. 36 (21 July, 1750); Bate and Strauss, I, p. 197.
24. The poem, which Mary Jacobus describes as "Southey's version of 'The Thorn'", was first published in the *Morning Post* (11 June, 1799) (Mary Jacobus, 'Southey's Debt to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)', *Review of English Studies*, 22 n.s., 85 (February, 1971), 20-36, p. 21).

She heard the doleful tidings of his death -
 And never smil'd again! And now she roams
 The dreary waste; there spends the livelong day,
 And there, unless when charity forbids,
 The livelong night. A tatter'd apron hides,
 Worn as a cloak, and hardly hides, a gown
 More tatter'd still; and both but ill conceal
 A bosom heav'd with never-ceasing sighs.
 She begs an idle pin of all she meets,
 And hoards them in her sleeve; but needful food,
 Though press'd with hunger oft, or comelier clothes,
 Though pinch'd with cold, asks never. - Kate is craz'd!
 (I, 534-556)

What is immediately obvious about the passage is the economy of its narrative -

A serving maid was she, and fell in love
 With one who left her, went to sea, and died.

To the contemporary reader the apparent casualness of these lines would have been somewhat shocking; one reviewer referred to the phrase 'fell in love' as 'colloquial barbarism'.²⁵ The pivotal crux of the plot (why did the man leave?) is left to surmise. Similarly we are not made privy to any information not available to the most casual observer. Cowper avoids the intricacy and depth of characterization which might have aroused a sense of empathy in the reader and indulges instead in some conventional moralizing in appropriately stilted verse (I, 541-542). This conjunction of inferred emotion and priggish animadversion is oddly operative also in Cowper's preoccupation with Kate's clothing, a preoccupation which ensures that her decline is conveyed in the most superficial and prurient manner. Our attention is drawn to what is poorly concealed by the tattered apron and gown, our interest increased by the syntactical delays; the poetry seems to centre on Kate's heaving bosom. I cannot agree with Mary Jacobus, who, citing the 'crazy Kate' passage, justly, I think, as a model for Wordsworth's 'indirect presentation of feeling', argues that 'Kate's bosom...is slipped in unobtrusively, almost as if it has been noticed by the reader himself'.²⁶ On the contrary, our attention is alerted as early

25. Unsigned review of William Cowper, *Poems* (1785), *Scots Magazine*, 48 (January, 1786), 25-27, p. 26.

26. *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads'* (1798), p. 167.

as line 550. Moreover, the poet's presence in the passage is hardly unobtrusive, though the slender narration but assertive moralizing ensure that the role in which he intrudes is closer to that of the judging reader than that of a narrator. Cowper, like Wordsworth, does not flatter the reader in the manner of conventional poetry of sensibility. Kate's feelings remain elusive in spite of Cowper's intervention. The prurience of the poetry which mimics the reader's inquisitiveness is implicitly criticized by Kate's pathetic and abstracted concern for her own appearance, a concern which leads her to beg pins instead of food from passers-by; we infer from this a vague wish to protect herself from prying eyes. At the same time her concern reveals more about the strength of her love than all the preceding description; she still feels a need to prepare for her lover's return. It is, of course, a need which insantly ignores the man's death and which is insantly expressed by begging for pins instead of clothes. Nevertheless, in what it reveals of her priorities, her current obsession directly relates, in its selfless devotion, to her earlier self when

she would sit and weep
At what a sailor suffers...
(I, 540-541)

The portrait of 'crazy Kate' revolves around 'an idle pin'. As one critic put it, 'what poet would have introduced so minute a circumstance into his representation! and yet that minuteness constitutes its happy effect'.²⁷

Like Cowper, Southey in his ballad courts a prurient interest -

Her feet were bare, and on her breast
Thro' rags did the winter blow...
(9-10)²⁸

But unlike Cowper, he does not belie it. In this poem Southey shows little

27. Unsigned notice, *Monthly Magazine*, 9, 5 (June, 1800), 498-500, p. 500.

28. *Annual Anthology*, edited by Robert Southey, 2 vols (Bristol, 1799-1800), II (1800), p. 70. All quotations from 'The Mad Woman' are from this edition. These lines from 'The Mad Woman' are analogous both to the 'crazy Kate' passage and to lines in the passage immediately following, the description of the gypsy camp -

The sportive wind blows wide
Their flutt'ring rags, and shows a tawny skin...
(I, 567-568)

Compare the following passage from Coleridge's 'On a Ruined House in a Romantic Country. By Nehemiah Higginbottom', which may also be a derivation from Cowper -

through those brogues still tatter'd and betorn,
His hindward charms gleam an unearthly white...
(*Annual Register*, 39 (1797), 455)

evidence that he had been, as one reviewer thought, 'seduced by the brilliant but dangerous excentricities of Cowper'.²⁹ The effect of Cowper's pin, mundane in itself and even more so in its blank verse context, is nowhere apparent in Southey's poem. Cowper startles the reader into an awareness of the complexity which familiar detail may disguise, encouraging a more precise, less prejudiced concentration. Southey, on the other hand, uses ordinary detail to make his narrative less fantastic. His poem concerns a woman who avoids fire because it reminds her of her crime, the murder of her illegitimate child whose body she burned. By giving prominence to details which recall the original crime, such as the Christmas fire which Martha shuns and the 'fever-fit' (24) with which she is apparently being punished, he both prepares for the full revelation of his extraordinary plot and endeavours to make it more credible; it is simply another form of the conventional method of suspending disbelief. 'The Mad Woman' owes less to Cowper, I think, than to the Gothic melodrama of Bürger's 'Des Pfarrers Tochter von Taubenhain', translated by William Taylor as 'The Lass of Fair Wone' in the *Monthly Magazine* of April, 1796.³⁰ Southey aims at the effect of Bürger's 'hovering fire', the ghost of a woman executed for murdering her child, within the context of a naturalistic narrative. However, since he is more interested in the details of the crime and the punishment than in the woman herself, Southey transforms a sophisticated metaphor for anger, guilt, insanity and inhuman love into mere superstition which the repetition of the poem's refrain appears to endorse -

For heavy is her crime, and strange
Her punishment hath been.
(31-32, 71-72)

Wordsworth, on the other hand, both learnt from Cowper's poetry and improved on it. Upsetting our expectations in order to render the familiar disquieting, the 'crazy Kate' passage, in what Jonathan Wordsworth describes as its 'use of significant detail',³¹ provides a model for one

29. Unsigned review of Robert Southey, *Poems*, vol. 2 (1799), *Monthly Review*, 31 n.s. (March, 1800), 261-267, p. 262.

30. For the influence of Bürger on Southey, see Stephen Maxfield Parrish, *The Art of the 'Lyrical Ballads'* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), p.87; Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads'* (1798), p.217.

31. Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity* (London, 1969), p. 62.

of Wordsworth's typical poetic methods. The withered thorn guides our responses to the characters involved in 'The Thorn'. It is true, as Mary Jacobus has pointed out, that 'the commonest of all literary associations for a thorn tree were illegitimate birth and child-murder',³² and that the immediate source for 'The Thorn' was Bürger's 'The Lass of Fair Wone'.³³ Nevertheless, if we cannot trace directly to Cowper the use of an unprepossessing detail, such as the thorn, as the focus of a tragic narrative, it is still worth remarking that the thorn both elicits and repudiates responses in a manner strikingly similar to the way in which detail in the 'crazy Kate' passage discourages premature judgment. Jacobus suggests that in 'The Thorn' 'the sensationalism of 'The Lass of Fair Wone' becomes lurid conjecture, neither confirmed nor denied'.³⁴ Perhaps in this transformation from a direct to an indirect narrative we may detect Cowper's influence.

In the passage which Jacobus quotes as evidence of this change (199-209) we are told that the villagers conjecture that Martha may have hanged her baby from the thorn. The reader similarly makes suppositions and draws analogies between the thorn overgrown with lichens and moss and the baby's premature death, Martha's stunted emotional growth, the bond of love and guilt between her and her dead baby which renders the hill of moss, which we suppose to be the baby's grave, beautiful. Yet we know nothing of Martha but what the gossiping narrator reveals. He is also aware of the analogy between Martha's evident struggle with herself and the thorn which seems to strive with the moss (232-242). Yet his interest in Martha we already know to be morbid, callous, intrusive and superstitious; he instructs his companion as to the best time to visit the scene and although there is some sensitivity in his reticence, he is inhibited from approaching Martha herself mainly by his fear of her (91-99). We pry into the causes and conditions of Martha's misery only at the cost of rendering ourselves vulnerable to the kind of criticism to which, we recognize, the narrator is liable.

32. *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads' (1798)*, p. 241.

33. *Ibid.*, pp. 242-244.

34. *Ibid.*, p. 246.

But what's the Thorn? and what the pond?
 And what the hill of moss to her?
 (199-200)³⁵

These, and the other questions which punctuate the poem, are questions which occur to every reader. Dramatizing his narrative so that we are actually eavesdropping on a conversation, Wordsworth manoeuvres us into the position of identifying with the narrator and his companion. We are forced to recognize that our urge to make some sense of Martha's existence is prompted by motives that are less than humane - motives, in fact, which Southey's poem depends upon and encourages. Wordsworth transforms our initial scepticism concerning the narrator into unease at our association with him. Martha seems, to him as well as to us, frighteningly alien; at one point she merges with the landscape, seemingly inanimate, 'a jutting crag' (182). Whether she is actually a part of the landscape, as Stephen Parrish suggests,³⁶ or not seems to me to make little difference, for in either case she symbolizes an alien nature.³⁷

She is known to every star,
 And every wind that blows...
 (69-70)

This is not simply the image of suffering that it is in *The Task* and Southey's ballad. The stars and the winds, representative of a natural universe from which the sea-captain is protected by the comforts of civilization, share a 'knowledge' which he and the reader are denied. Yet at the same time, in spite of this similarity, we recognize the inadequacy of the narrator's many disavowals of knowledge (89-90, 98-99, 144-151, 164-165, 203, 212-213, 232) and refrain from his persistent

35. *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, II (1952), p. 247. All quotations from Wordsworth's poems, other than *The Prelude*, are from this edition.

36. Parrish, pp. 97-114.

37. A section from Dorothy Wordsworth's journal of the Scottish tour in 1803 provides an interesting parallel. She notes that Wordsworth, after coming across a young cowherd on a hillside near Tarbet, at night and in a lonely place covered with mist, described the scene as 'a text... containing in itself the whole history of the Highlander's life' and signifying, amongst other things, his 'communion with the unworldliness of nature' (Dorothy Wordsworth, *Recollections of a Tour Made in Scotland in 1803*, edited by J.C. Shairp, third edition (Edinburgh, 1894), p. 116).

curiosity. By identifying our anxiety for understanding with the narrator's superstition, Wordsworth compels us towards acceptance. The natural order that the narrator unknowingly confronts and interrogates is of a kind that at once commands our horrified respect and defies our comprehension. Like Cowper's pin, the thorn chastens the reader's imagination. Our desire to intervene, our belief in our own capacity to understand, is made to seem presumptuous in the face of the inhumanity of Martha's existence, defined as it is by the cry with which the poem ends.³⁸

Wordsworth extends the 'levelling' process of Cowper's strategy by making us identify with a character of whom we cannot approve. Because the plot of 'The Thorn', like that of 'The Mad Woman', is conveyed by means of dramatically realized characters, we are involved in the process of recollected discovery and are not simply the passive audience for a narrated story; the narration moves freely between present and past so that the reader, like the stranger in both poems, must reconstruct for himself the sequence from past to present. The reader is compelled to surrender the role of detached judge as well as that of willing participant.

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38. David Simpson has provided a suggestive and cogent interpretation of 'The Thorn', with much of which I would agree, but by identifying the poet with the sea-captain, he posits only two potential positions for the poet and the reader - compromising judgment or neutrality - and indeed hints that only one of these is really possible -

The sea-captain is an emblem of the poet in that he claimed not to judge or interpret, and indeed tries not to do so, but yet he ends up by closing off the possibilities for the production of meaning in a much more deceptive and secretive way. He is offering us the chance to make up our own minds, but is at the same time trying to predetermine the decision we must come to. At this level of involvement, it may well be that the poem is suggesting that there is only complicity, at the same time as showing the cruelties and misappropriations inherent in that complicity where human lives are involved.

(p.133)

Although Simpson describes the effect of the sea-captain's disavowals well, I would suggest that the dramatization of the narrator enables the reader to distinguish between the sea-captain and the poet and hence to remain wary of the former's tentativeness. It seems to me that Wordsworth, like Cowper at his best, at once suggesting judgments and exposing them as inadequate, guides the reader to a position of indeterminateness where he is capable of distinguishing between levels of uncertainty and degrees of 'involvement' in such a way that he is neither totally incapacitated nor totally compromised.

In Cowper's poetry, on the other hand, participation of any kind is rarely possible. It was common to attribute the reader's sense of exclusion to Cowper's personality. According to one commentator -

Cowper...looked at the world 'through the loop-holes of retreat'. The shyness which held him back from his fellow-men during almost the whole maturity of his intellect, necessarily narrowed his opportunities for observing individual character. His views of life are less coloured from nature, than worked up from meditation and theory...³⁹

Hazlitt similarly discerned in Cowper

the finicalness of the private gentleman, who does not care whether he completes his work or not; and in whatever he does, is evidently more solicitous to please himself than the public. There is an effeminacy about him, which shrinks from and repels common and hearty sympathy... He is delicate to fastidiousness, and glad to get back, after a romantic adventure with crazy Kate...to the drawing room and the ladies again...⁴⁰

The 'crazy Kate' passage certainly seems, at first glance, to be a vignette designed to occasion the self-indulgent *frisson* associated with sentimental poetry, 'a romantic adventure', in Hazlitt's words. It seems to approach and retire from the limits of decency in that kind of titillating manner and it occurs in the context of a discussion about the appeal of deformity to the jaded taste, familiar from the theory of the picturesque; we are prepared to respond to Kate as to the 'prickly gorse' (I, 527) on the common. And yet, it seems to me, there is nothing casual in the sense that Hazlitt implies about the manner in which Kate is introduced. If, as I have endeavoured to suggest, empathy is shown to be an inappropriate response to Kate's very private misery, then so is the detachment with which Cowper, comparing various landscapes, prepares his introduction of her.

Jonathan Wordsworth nevertheless suggests that 'Kate remains a picturesque figure'.⁴¹ Certainly that is how Cowper's early readers seem to have regarded her. In an engraving by Legat after Stothard, included in an edition of Cowper's poems published in 1798,⁴² Kate occupies the

39. Unsigned review of George Crabbe, *Tales of the Hall* (1819), *Edinburgh Monthly Review*, 2 (September, 1819), 287-302; Pollard, p. 248.

40. William Hazlitt, 'On Thomson and Cowper', *Lectures on the English Poets* (1818); Howe, V (1930), pp. 91-92.

41. Jonathan Wordsworth, p. 62.

42. William Cowper, *Poems*, 2 vols (London, 1798), II, facing p. 30.

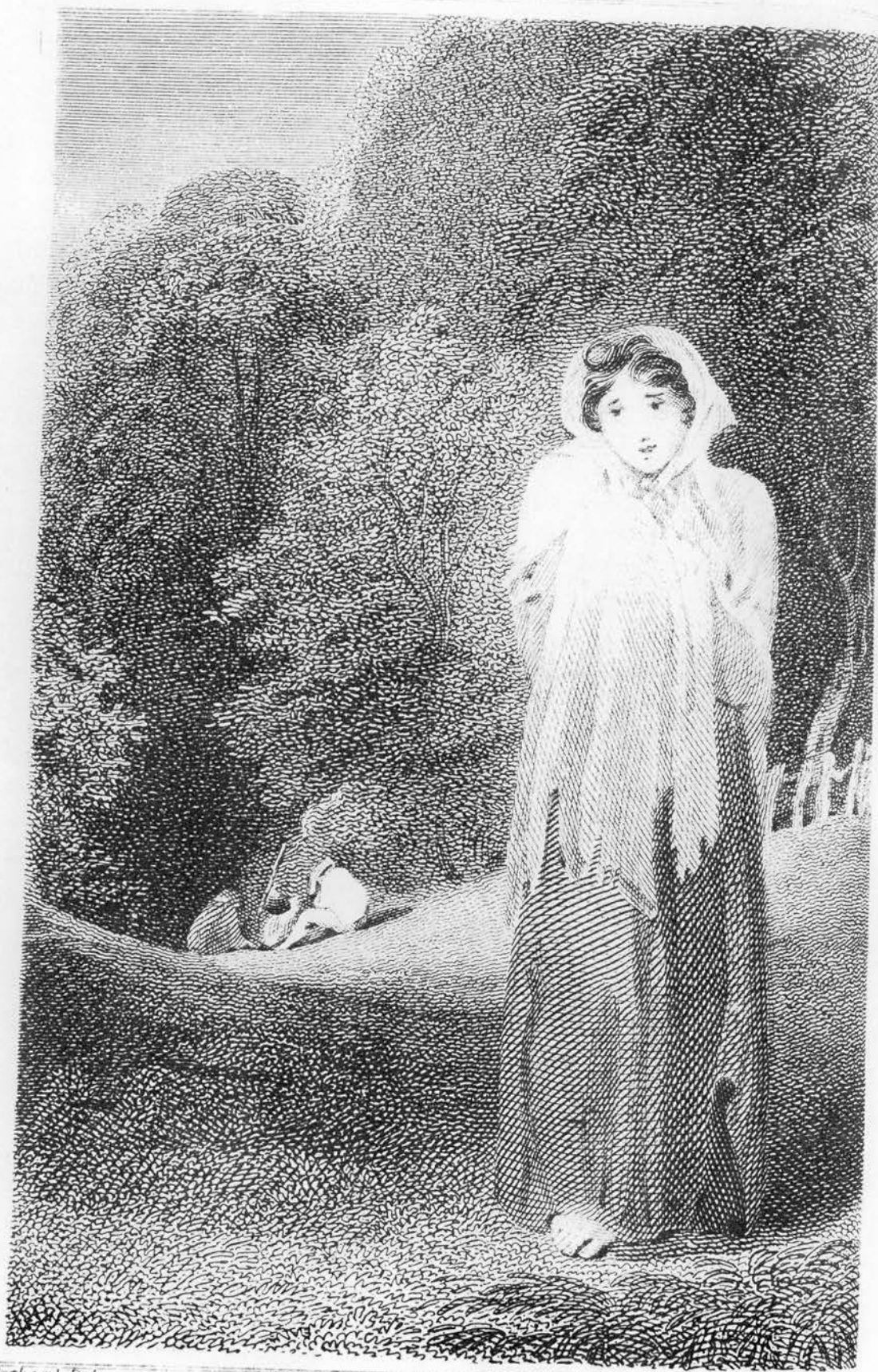
foreground of a pastoral scene, facing away from three figures in the background who are seated in a hollow to the left, two with their backs to her; another figure on the right peers from the wood. Kate's very prominence in the scene, her apparent isolation and neglect, invite a special relationship with us. Though dressed in rags, she is self-possessed enough to cover herself modestly and she is still pretty; her expression is melancholy rather than insane. She is sufficiently at odds with her surroundings to be picturesque and yet remains individually appealing - her mouth is petite and red, her cheeks are plump and her hair is tidy and gleaming. Stothard achieves this effect by interpreting Kate's insanity as unworldly innocence. Her unworldliness is conveyed by the manner in which her neat and plump appearance sets her at a metaphorical distance from her ragged clothes. This is totally at variance with Cowper's poem, in which the details of Kate's clothing act as metaphors for Kate herself and measure her decline from a maidservant in fashionable society to an exposed and vulnerable outcast, but it enables Stothard to evade the question of social status and so remove any possible offence from his Kate's appeal.⁴³ A much better engraving, less obviously contrived, by Rolls after Westall, in an edition published by John Sharpe in 1817,⁴⁴ shows Kate alone in a stark, almost featureless landscape against a stormy sky. She is facing away from us, staring abstractedly at the ground, her face gaunt. This drawing, an exercise in the sublime manner, seeks to inspire awe rather than sympathy. Neither engraving, however, succeeds, it seems to me, in representing Cowper's poetry. In the poem Kate's obsession excludes the possibility of relationship; its manifestations are trivial rather than tragic in dimension. In this context our sympathy is inquisitive and our awe presumptuous.

43. See the following passage from an essay entitled 'Chapters on English Poetry' in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* -

The meek innocence of Stothard's style of design is a better embodiment of the same feeling which inspired the Rosa-Matildas and Edwins. Miserably mannered and without character his figures are; but many of his females are perfect saints, and almost deserve the value which is still put on them.

(*Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 8 n.s. (May, 1840), 303-313, p. 312).

44. William Cowper, *Poems*, 24 pts (London, 1817-1818), pt 1 (1817), title-page to *The Task*.



Stothard Del.

Published Feb. 1. 1798, by J. Johnson London.

Legat Sculp

Kate is Crazy.

THE TASK.

BOOK I.



_____ A tatter'd apron hides,
Worn as a cloak, and hardly hides a gown
More tatter'd still; _____
_____ Kate is craz'd.

DRAWN BY RICHARD WESTALL R.A. ENGRAVED BY J. H. ROBINSON;
PUBLISHED BY JOHN SHARPE, PICCADILLY.
OCT. 1. 1817.

Although Cowper's poetry was popular with artists and engravers, it is not very amenable to pictorial representation. Illustrations cannot usually give prominence to what is apparently insignificant in the unobtrusive manner of the poetry. Within the confines of an engraving there is little room for subtle detail, contrasts or intricate composition. More importantly, the engravings assume an uncomplicated relationship with the reader, who is placed in the position of privileged spectator. It is precisely this relationship that the poetry discountenances.

In Book I, for instance, Cowper refrains from composing a series of landscapes for the benefit of the reader. His description at times more closely resembles a catalogue of privately cherished details. His attention is guided by the pleasure of personal familiarity - here the Ouse, there the herdsman's hut (I, 163-180); it is a reserved pleasure which the reader is not invited to experience. In another passage he begins to describe the activity surrounding a sheep-fold and hay-field but interrupts his description to recite the charms of the individual trees of a nearby wood (I, 288-320). The only apparent relation between the two scenes is their equal attractiveness to the poet. The incongruity so annoyed Byron that he referred to the passage as 'Cowper's Dutch delineation of a wood, drawn up like a seedsman's catalogue'.⁴⁵ As with the 'crazy Kate' passage and its context, the changing relationship between the observer and the scene, altered by shifts in perspective, is more important here than the possibility of shared aesthetic pleasure to be gained from recreating in poetry a perceived landscape.

Cowper, like Crabbe, was aware of the effect of distance. Looking down from an 'eminence' (I, 154), he sees a ploughman 'diminish'd to a boy' (I, 162). Shortly afterwards, from another summit, Cowper observes two waggons passing each other on the road, one loaded with hay and the other empty (I, 295-299). He is close enough to overhear one driver urging on his horses. The sheep seem to pour across the field like a stream and then, scattering, gradually 'whiten all the land' (I, 290-294). The cattle, on the other hand, observed earlier from what was presumably a greater distance, seemed to be 'sprinkled o'er' the plain (I, 163-164).

45. Lord Byron, *Letter on the Rev. W.L. Bowles's 'Strictures on the Life and Writings of Pope'* (London, 1821), p. 40.

Whereas the first scene was enhanced by the remote sound of church bells, the second is disturbed by the 'vocif'rous' driver, whom Cowper describes as 'boorish' (I, 298-299).

Contrasts such as these accumulate and refine definitions of Cowper's attitude to retirement. His elevated position above the sheep-fold and hay-field gives him a sense of dominance -

Now roves the eye;
And, posted on this speculative height,
Exults in its command.

(I, 288-290)

But it is a dominance vulnerable to disturbance by intimations of conflicting lives, such as that of 'the boorish driver'. Similarly, within the rectory, Cowper, at an apparently safe remove from the world, feels a sense of superiority -

Thus sitting, and surveying thus at ease
The globe and its concerns, I seem advanc'd
To some secure and more than mortal height,
That lib'rates and exempts me from them all.
It turns submitted to my view, turns round
With all its generations; I behold
The tumult, and am still.

(IV, 94-100)

Yet it is a transparently illusory security, often punctured even by the arrival of the post and belied by Cowper's evident timidity in the face of the world -

'Tis pleasant through the loop-holes of retreat
To peep at such a world...

(IV, 88-89)

Cowper is amused by his own momentary arrogance. The recurrence of military metaphors may be an aspect of the exaggerated posturing indicative of that amusement but it also suggests the extent to which composure, for Cowper, depends upon guarding against possible disturbances, the extent to which 'liberate' and 'exempt' are, for him, synonymous.

Cowper establishes a pattern in *The Task* by alternately asserting and undermining a sense of security. Between the passages in Book I discussed above is the passage concerning 'the peasant's nest' (I, 220-251), a cottage attractively secluded within a group of elms. At first sight it seems a welcome alternative to the noise and bustle of the town. Then the poet considers the difficulty of obtaining even the necessities of life in that remote spot and decides to regard the cottage henceforth as 'a pleasing object' rather than a potential 'abode'. Cowper anticipated

this passage in a letter to John Newton in 1781, referring to

a snug cottage, which on account of its situation at a distance from noise and disagreeable objects, seemed to promise me all I could wish or expect... People imagine they should be happy in circumstances which they would find insupportably burthensome in less than a week. A man that has been cloathed in fine linen, and fared sumptuously ev'ry day, envies the peasant under a thatched hovel, who in return envies Him as much his palace and his pleasure-ground. Could they change situations the fine gentleman would find his ceilings were too low, and that his casements admitted too much wind, that he had no cellar for his wine, and no wine to put in his cellar. These with a thousand other mortifying deficiencies, would shatter his romantic project into innumerable fragments in a moment. The Clown at the same time would find the accession of so much unwieldy treasure an incumbrance quite incompatible with an hour's ease.

This, as Cowper wrote, was 'a School-boy's theme',⁴⁶ a theme often used in sermons, addressed more often to the poor than to the wealthy, in order to quell discontent -

Discontent...in fact is delusion. We see nothing but the outside, and fair side, of a man's condition; we see not the secret of the real difficulties and inconveniences; or if we hear their complaint, we do not feel their sufferings: whereas our own situation is understood to the bottom, the evils and hardships of it are all found out... With such prejudices, it is no wonder we form very false computations, and are betrayed, without reason, into complaint and injustice... The greater part of mankind get nothing by a change, but to regret advantages which they despised, or did not even perceive, whilst they possessed them; and to discover new sources of anxiety and complaint.⁴⁷

Many of Cowper's concerns in *The Task* come together in the 'peasant's nest' passage - the deceptiveness of appearances and the elusiveness of truth, the desire for solitude and the importance of society, the hardship of the poor and the complacency of the prosperous. Summarized in this way, however, *The Task* seems a collocation of 'School-boy's themes'. It is true that much of it belongs to the continuing debate about the status of the poor. In the description of the thresher in Book I we find the familiar contrast between the enervating luxury of the wealthy townsman and the healthy labour of the poor countryman -

46. Letter to John Newton (16 August, 1781); King and Ryskamp, I (1979), pp. 507-508.

47. William Paley, 'Discontent', in *The Works of William Paley*, 7 vols (London, 1825), VI, pp. 410-417, pp. 412-413.

Come hither, ye that press your beds of down
 And sleep not: see him sweating o'er his bread
 Before he eats it. - 'Tis the primal curse,
 But soften'd into mercy; made the pledge
 Of cheerful days, and nights without a groan.
 (I, 362-366)

In Book IV the hard-won independence of the virtuous poor is contrasted with the unscrupulous complaints of the idle poor (IV, 374-512). As Cowper himself acknowledges (IV, 513-522), the older values associated with the country of innocent simplicity and inevitable contentment had been exposed as illusory. Now contentment was regarded as the reward of self-help and thrift; destitution, more often than not, resulted from indolence, immorality, or ambitious pride. 'The graduated scale / Of order' (IV, 585-586), bonded by ties of mutual and accepted obligation, had been reduced, because of the irresponsibility of the rich, the callousness of their officers, and the discontent of the poor, to an unholy alliance of the corrupt state (IV, 500-512), the predatory corporation (IV, 671-683) and the humiliating poor laws (IV, 408-419).

The only effective preservative of the collapsing social order, most commentators agreed, was the independence of the poor. *The Deserted Village* was still being cited in support of this proposition in 1807 when James Brewer summarized Goldsmith's argument as follows -

[I]nternal security remains, while a spirit of self-dependence is cherished among those classes which till their native soil in contented obscurity. But this spirit once perverted, the vital sources of national prosperity fail; and though the bloated mass which remains may assume for a short period a sickly greatness, each fresh minute hastens the day of inevitable dissolution.⁴⁸

The image of the independent cottager gradually replaced that of the innocent peasant living amidst natural plenty as the dominant pastoral image of a disappearing way of life.⁴⁹ Thus Cowper disclaims belief in 'the fair shepherdess of old romance' (IV, 538) but substitutes in her place 'the rural lass' with

48. J.N. Brewer, *Some Thoughts on the Present State of the English Peasantry* (London, 1807), p. 6. Compare *The Deserted Village*, lines 389-394.

49. In the terms of the pastoral dichotomy defined by Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas as 'soft' and 'hard' primitivism (Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1935), pp. 9-11) the images of 'hard' primitivism gained ascendancy over those of 'soft' primitivism. See Robert W. Malcolmson, *Life and Labour in England 1700-1780* (London, 1981) - 'the patrician retreat from paternalism, in its various forms, was central to the changing class relations of the [eighteenth] century' (p. 151).

her virgin modesty and grace,
Her artless manners, and her neat attire,
So dignified...

(IV, 534-537)

a character basically similar to the 'Poor, yet industrious, modest, quiet, neat' housewife of an earlier passage (IV, 374). Independence in this context, however, meant not the self-sufficiency of Goldsmith's husbandmen but the self-reliance of the poor who preferred to suffer privations rather than accept parish assistance.

It was the reason for the erosion of this 'spirit of self-dependence' that aroused disagreement, some arguing that the poor were being denied the means of self-reliance by the rich and others insisting that they were being encouraged to rely on the rich for their welfare. As regards the poor laws, for instance, some opposed them in principle as a way of depriving the poor of their independent means of subsistence. In *A Reply to Malthus's Essay on Population* (1807) Hazlitt predicted the effect of Whitbread's proposed Poor Law Bill of 1807

to be putting the poor into the wardship of the rich, to be doing away the little remains of independence we have left, and making them once more what they were formerly, the vassals of a wealthy aristocracy.⁵⁰

Others, such as the reviewer of Hazlitt's book for the *Edinburgh Review*, saw the poor laws as an irresponsible effort to improve the conditions of the poor which could only 'foster helpless, indolent and improvident habits'.⁵¹

Brewer set out the terms of the debate -

Is the present depravity of spirit common among the labouring classes in country life, occasioned by such a fortuitous degradation of sentiment as has gradually impaired all manly and virtuous notions of self-dependence; or is it induced by an extraneous cause, provoking a base humility of temper, by positively displaying the impossibility of independence under the nature of existing circumstances?⁵²

In simplistic terms, the question was whether, with respect to a widely accepted decline, more emphasis was given to social oppression or moral

50. Howe, I (1930), p. 183.

51. Unsigned review, *Edinburgh Review*, 32 (August, 1810), 464-476, p. 471.

52. Brewer, p. 16.

deterioration.⁵³ A letter to the Editor of the *Monthly Magazine* in 1818 describes a confrontation between two individuals supporting opposite sides of the debate -

I went into the vestry, and had some conversation with a farmer... He was a hard man, and complained to me *of the degeneracy* of the poor; observing that a few years ago a labouring man was proud of supporting himself and his family without the assistance of the parish; and that one man, then, would perform nearly the work of two at the present day. I endeavoured to convince him that the farmers themselves were the persons who had destroyed this spirit of independence in the poor, and had compelled them to have recourse to parish relief. Formerly, a poor man could live by his labour, and the food which he was able to procure for himself strengthened him for the most laborious employment; but, now, the generality of farmers have cut off all the little privileges and assistances which used to be granted to their men.⁵⁴

Remedies put forward were correspondingly opposed. According to Cobbett, for instance -

It is not little books that can make a people good; that can make them moral; that can restrain them from committing crimes. I believe that books, of any sort, never yet had that tendency... [Y]et, God help me, I have read books enough, and amongst the rest, a great part of the religious tracts. Amongst the labouring people, the first thing you have to look after is, *common honesty, speaking the truth and refraining from thieving*; and to secure these, the labourer must have *his belly full* and be *free from fear*; and this belly full must come to him from out of his *wages*, and not from benevolence of any description.⁵⁵

Cowper supported the opposing side of the debate, believing that a general spiritual deterioration was responsible for the degradation of the poor. While he agreed that guaranteed constitutional liberties had to be upheld, true independence, he thought, only accompanied a personal relationship with God - 'Grace makes the slave a freeman' (V, 688). One of the central tenets of Evangelicalism was that man was naturally depraved, the fullness or otherwise of his belly notwithstanding.⁵⁶ The rise of Evangelicalism

53. For the history of ideas of decline in the eighteenth century, see Whitney, pp. 42-51.

54. *Monthly Magazine*, 46, 317 (October, 1818), 229-230, p. 229.

55. William Cobbett, *Rural Rides*, edited by George Woodcock (Harmondsworth, 1975), p. 45.

56. John Henry Overton, *The Evangelical Revival in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1886), pp. 187-188.

in the late eighteenth century, with which Cowper was associated, was accompanied by a more active ministry to the poor designed to help them to restrain their natural tendency to evil. Hannah More worked closely with the Clapham Sect of Evangelicals; the Sect assisted in the distribution of the Cheap Repository Tracts and actually wrote some of them.⁵⁷ Through these tracts Hannah More promoted models similar to those in Cowper's poetry of the virtuous poor, such as 'The Shepherd of Salisbury Plain', and of the idle poor, such as 'Black Giles the Poacher'. Other tracts, such as 'The Way to Plenty', were intended to demonstrate to the poor that 'their distresses arise nearly as much from their own bad management as from the hardness of the times'.⁵⁸ These tracts presented a more pragmatic version, designed to appeal to the less devotional poor,⁵⁹ of Cowper's injunction in one of the *Olney Hymns*, entitled 'For the Poor' -

To JESUS then your trouble bring,
Nor murmur at your lot;
While you are poor, and he is King,
You shall not be forgot.

(17-20)

In the winter of 1782 Cowper wrote to Mrs Newton -

The rigor of the season and the advanced price of grain are very threat'ning to the poor. It is well with those that can feed upon a promise, and wrap themselves up warm in the robe of Salvation. A good fire-side and a well-spread table are but very indifferent substitutes for these better accommodations; so very indifferent, that I would gladly exchange them both, for the rags and unsatisfied hunger of the poorest creature that looks forward with hope to a better world & weeps tears of joy in the midst of penury and distress.⁶⁰

Self-restraint would earn the poor the 'title to a treasure in the skies' ('Truth', 330). Of Cowper Hannah More wrote to her sister -

57. Jones, *Hannah More*, pp. 86-101, 139-143.

58. Letter to Mrs Boscawen (November, 1793); Roberts, II, p. 386.

59. See the letter from Hannah More to John Newton (1794) -
The religious poor, whether in the church, or among Methodists or Dissenters, little need this sort of help; but it is the profligate multitude that want to be drawn off from that pernicious trash, the corruption of which is incalculable.
(*ibid.*, p. 429)

60. Letter to Mrs Newton (23 November, 1782); King and Ryskamp, II (1981), p. 92.

I am enchanted with this poet; his images are so natural and so much his own! Such an original and philosophic thinker! such genuine Christianity! and such a divine simplicity!⁶¹

Hannah More may have been misled by a perceived identity of interest into exaggerated praise. Cowper's originality did not lie in his thought. 'My principal purpose', he wrote to John Newton, 'is to allure the Reader by character, by scenery, by imagery and such poetical embellishments, to the Reading of what may profit him'.⁶² Cowper intended to reinforce in *The Task* the doctrines that were being delivered from the pulpit (II, 326-338) but in a manner calculated to appeal, like Hannah More's tracts, to the less devotional reader. Unlike the tracts, however, the poem was not addressed to the poor. His aim, Cowper continued in his letter to Newton, was

to combat that predilection in favour of a Metropolis that beggars and exhausts the Country by evacuating it of all its principal Inhabitants. And collaterally and as far as is consistent with this double Intention, to have a stroke at vice, Vanity and folly wherever I find them.

Most of the portraits of the poor in the poem are adapted to this aim. The poor are presented as passive victims of developments originating elsewhere or as unwitting models of virtue for those capable of appreciating the lesson. For instance, after castigating the rural poor for poaching, drunkenness and false pride in Book IV, Cowper concludes, with a simplification which we have already noticed in connection with Goldsmith - 'The town has ting'd the country' (IV, 553). The town, with its monopoly of vice, is here pictured as gradually expropriating the environment of virtue, the country. In this context the much-praised simplicity of the poor is seen as gullibility, which allows, for instance, the recruiting sergeant to transform their 'infant's ignorance' into 'vanity and brainless rage' (IV, 619, 624).

As we noted in the third chapter, the traditional paternalism of pastoral had become both more literal and more emotive under the combined pressure of the movements towards sentiment and empirical observation so that familial and domestic images became more overt. As far as representations

61. Letter to her sister (February, 1786); Roberts, II, p. 10.

62. Letter to John Newton (27 November, 1784); King and Ryskamp, II (1981), p. 301.

of the poor were concerned, pastoral became even less dialectical in structure as its antitheses became more absolute (though, of course, Blake, who exploited the popularity of domestic imagery to greatest effect in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, and, to a lesser extent, Goldsmith, with his attempted synthesis of judgment and sentiment, were exceptions to this). However, even though the city and the country were now true polar opposites, it was still the civilized reader who usually provided the standards for judging between them. Thus Cowper can praise the poor and yet associate them with infancy and ignorance; moreover, this association is juxtaposed with references to the insensibility of the poor, which enables the waggoner, for example, to fulfil his duties in conditions that others would reject as intolerable (IV, 341-373). Descriptions of the poor as infantile and crude tended to discredit the idea that society as a whole was inevitably progressing, a belief that was, I have suggested, no longer widespread. Instead, in Cowper's more moralizing passages, such descriptions provided homilies for the middle-class reader designed to improve and consolidate his superior position in the vertical scale of civilization; this is the case when Cowper's purpose is to reprove -

Increase of pow'r begets increase of wealth;
Wealth luxury, and luxury excess...

(IV, 580-581)

or to encourage -

It seems the part of wisdom, and no sin
Against the law of love, to measure lots
With less distinguish'd than ourselves; that thus
We may with patience bear our mod'rate ills,
And sympathise with others, suff'ring more.

(V, 336-340)

Cowper's satire is tempered by appeals to the influence and sensitivity of his readers, who were presumably more prepared to admire the qualities of the poor if their inferiority was at the same time affirmed. Though some of his least qualified criticism was directed at trade, Cowper, according to De Quincey, was the poet most generally valued by the merchant class.⁶³

63. Masson, I (1889), p. 26.

Nevertheless, we have no reason to doubt the genuineness of Cowper's sympathy for the poor, however expedient or conventional it may at times appear. He deplored, for instance, the proposed removal of tariffs on Irish goods in 1780 which would have destroyed the meagre livings of the lace-makers of Olney.⁶⁴ Yet his description of a lace-maker in 'Truth' (317-336) does not encourage thoughts of attempting to improve her precarious existence; on the contrary, she is 'safe in the simplicity' (336) of her heart and provides a standard by which the daring but fragile genius of a Voltaire may be measured and found wanting. The engraving by Engleheart after Westall which accompanies this passage in an edition of Cowper's poems published by John Sharpe in 1810⁶⁵ presents an image of quiet modesty, simply but not poorly dressed, with eyes demurely bent in concentration on her work. The cottager is not too distractingly poor to be a model of behaviour to those to whom poverty was no more than a spiritual lesson, a lesson conveyed here with a deference which would have made it acceptable. In another engraving by Neagle after Stothard⁶⁶ she is seated with a neighbour, also making lace, and a young boy, reading perhaps the Bible. She looks up momentarily to see a ray of light emanating from heaven; in a scene of semi-darkness she radiates light. She is accompanied by images of industrious but comfortable domesticity - a broom, a plump cat. In yet another engraving, by Dadley after Craig in an edition of Cowper's poems published by S.A. Oddy,⁶⁷ she is actually reading her Bible as she works. One of Cowper's letters contains a passage similar to that in 'Truth' -

Oh, what things pass in cottages and hovels, which the great never dream of! French philosophers amuse themselves, and, according to their own phrase, cover themselves with glory, by inventing air-balls, which, by their own buoyancy, ascend above the clouds, and are lost in regions which no human contrivance could ever penetrate before. An English tailor, an inhabitant of the dunghills of Silver End, prays, and his prayer ascends into the ears of the Lord

64. See his letter to Joseph Hill (8 July, 1780); King and Ryskamp, I (1979), p. 425.

65. William Cowper, *Poems*, 2 vols (London, 1810), I, facing p. 76.

66. William Cowper, *Poems*, 2 vols (London, 1798), I, facing p. 76.

67. William Cowper, *Poems*, 2 vols (London, 1813-1814), I (1813), facing p. 90.



Drawn by Rich^d Westall, R.A.

Page 76 .

Engraved by F. Engleheart.

TRUTH.

YON COTTAGER, WHO WEAVES AT HER OWN DOOR,
PILLOW AND BOBBINS ALL HER LITTLE STORE;
JUST EARNS A SCANTY PITTANCE.

VOL. I.

LONDON, PUBLISHED JUNE 1. 1810, BY JOHN SHARPE, PICCADILLY.



Stothard Del.

Published, Feb. 1. 1798, by J. Johnson London.

Neagle Sculp.

*You Cottager, who weaves at her own door,
Pillow and bobbins all her little store;
Content tho' mean* _____



W. M. Craig del.

L. Dudley sculp.

*"Ye Cottager, who weaves at her own door
Just know, and knows no more, her Bible true"*
truth.

of Sabaoth. He indeed covers himself with glory, fights battles, and gains victories, but makes no noise. Europe is not astonished at his feats, foreign Academies do not seek him for a member; he will never discover the art of flying, or send a globe of taffeta up to heaven. But he will go thither himself. I am afraid there is hardly a philosopher among them that would be wise enough to change conditions with him if he could, yet certainly there is not one that would not be infinitely a gainer by doing so.⁶⁸

The poverty of the tailor and of his counterpart, the lace-maker, are attractively enough described for this thought not to seem in dubious taste.⁶⁹

Nevertheless, in passages such as these, in the letters and in the poetry, the seriousness of the intention is threatened by the uncertainty of the tone, which constantly verges on a kind of embarrassed and self-critical satire. There is a sense of amused and self-conscious bravura which conflicts with the whole-hearted approval of the engravings. It is difficult, for instance, to keep distinct the air-balls of the French philosophers and the prayers of the tailor. It is difficult to ignore the note of flippancy in Cowper's statement that the poor 'can feed upon a promise, and wrap themselves up warm in the robe of Salvation'. In the description of the lace-maker Cowper alternates between frivolous wit ('her heart and pocket light', 'Truth', 322) and pomposity ('toilsome and indigent', 326). In a corresponding passage in *The Task* he begins with a bitter and inappropriately comic sarcasm -

Warm'd, while it lasts, by labour, all day long
They brave the season, and yet find at eve,
Ill clad and fed but sparely, time to cool.

(IV, 377-379)

Histrionic poses compete for attention with matter-of-fact descriptions of hopeless squalor -

68. Letter to John Newton (23 September, 1783); Wright, II, pp. 101-102.

69. John Barrell argues that in this period 'the deserving poor are characterised by extreme neatness, and an air of reasonable material, as well as spiritual, well-being' in both poetry and painting for the dual purpose of distinguishing them from the undeserving poor and providing models of virtue for the polite culture (*The Dark Side of the Landscape*, pp. 75-77).

The taper soon extinguish'd, which I saw
 Dangled along at the cold finger's end
 Just when the day declin'd, and the brown loaf
 Lodg'd on the shelf, half eaten, without sauce
 Of sav'ry cheese, or butter, costlier still...

(IV, 391-395)

Whereas in the 'crazy Kate' passage the detailed observation served to deflect the sentimental and the commonplace, here the poetry endeavours to embrace at once sentimental moralism and detached reportage and the effect is merely to dissipate attention.

It is undeniable that Cowper found it difficult to be serious without being miserable and this, together with a strongly developed sense of the ridiculous, meant that he could not easily achieve an assured tone. It is not unusual to find, in poetry written for the purpose of avoiding difficulty, that the subject is not being steadily observed -

[I]t is no easy matter for the owner of a mind like mine, to divert it from sad subjects, & fix it upon such as may administer to its amusement. Poetry, above all things, is useful to me in this respect. While I am held in pursuit of pretty images, or a pretty way of expressing them, I forget every thing that is irksome, &, like a boy that plays truant, determine to avail myself of the present opportunity to be amused, & to put by the disagreeable recollection that I must after all, go home & be whipt again.⁷⁰

In this passage there is a chilling sense of a violent despair being determinedly repressed. Elsewhere, in the passages discussed above, this determination is less apparent than a nervousness about the compatibility of instruction and pleasure. Cowper's attention was divided between what he described as 'the Importance of his subject' and what he regarded as the debased taste of his readers. He often felt the need to justify his poetry to his mentor, John Newton. Describing *Table Talk* to him, Cowper wrote -

In short, there is some froth, and here and there a bit of sweetmeat, which seems to entitle it justly to the name of a certain dish the Ladies call a Trifle... A Poet in my Circumstances has a difficult part to act. One minute obliged to bridle his Humor if he has any, and the next, to clap a Spur to the Sides of it. Now ready to weep from a Sense of the Importance of his subject, and on a sudden constrain'd to Laugh lest his gravity should be mistaken for Dullness.⁷¹

70. Letter to John Newton (21 December, 1780); King and Ryskamp, I (1979), p. 425.

71. Letter to John Newton (18 February, 1781); *ibid.*, pp. 444-445.

This divided attention would occasionally ensue in a style which seems staged for the benefit of readers whom Cowper described as 'fastidious', 'listless' and superficial (II, 304-311), a style to which Cowper seems to have had only half-hearted commitment. When he aimed for the whimsy of what Hannah More called 'winter pastoral', he usually succeeded in conveying only embarrassment at the possibility of revealing the true depth of his feeling to unappreciative readers. He was a confessional poet unwilling to confide.

Hannah More described *The Task* as 'very rambling'.⁷² One reviewer went so far as to say that Cowper's style consisted in writing '"whatever comes uppermost", in the first language that occurs'.⁷³ This reader, at least, felt insulted by Cowper's apparent neglect of his audience. As we have seen, the poem sometimes verges on soliloquy, as though Cowper were simply rehearsing private pleasures in the suspicion that to anyone else his poetry could only be 'an empty ineffectual sound' (III, 22). Yet, as we have also noticed, a sense of exclusion is central to the poem. When Cowper describes himself

As one who, long in thickets and in brakes
Entangled, winds now this way and now that
His devious course uncertain, seeking home...
(III, 1-3)

he anchors the poem's casual and 'rambling' style to its deepest concerns.

Cowper is acutely conscious of the experiences from which he feels himself to be irredeemably excluded. He comes across a thresher within John Throckmorton's estate. In that context the thresher seems part of an arranged landscape designed to give the illusion of nature without its discomforts -

We tread the wilderness, whose well-roll'd walks,
With curvature of slow and easy sweep -
Deception innocent - give ample space
To narrow bounds. The grove receives us next;
Between the upright shafts of whose tall elms
We may discern the thresher at his task.
(I, 351-356)

72. Letter to her sister (February, 1786); Roberts, II, p. 10.

73. Unsigned review of William Cowper, *Poems*, vol. 3 (1815), *Monthly Review*, 79 (March, 1816), 296-310, p. 304.

Yet the thresher also measures the distance between Cowper, whose cultivated sensibility requires landscapes arranged for the sake of variety, relaxation and renewal, and the poor, who are capable of accepting the wilderness untamed. 'The constant flail' (I, 357) of the thresher, rising and falling, seems to imitate the movement of the earth -

By ceaseless action all that is subsists.
Constant rotation of th' unwearied wheel
That nature rides upon maintains her health,
Her beauty, her fertility.

(I, 367-370)

An engraving by Raddon after Craig, in Oddy's edition,⁷⁴ shows the poet, immaculately dressed in clothes unsuitable for anything more laborious than a leisurely walk, observing from behind an elm in the shade the thresher working in his shirtsleeves in the sun. Cowper here, as the engraving accurately reflects, hints at a social distance that is unnatural. The poor seem to live in a more direct communion with the natural cycle - gay as the lark (I, 493-498), inured to the elements (IV, 350-365) - which the rounds of civilized society only mimic -

the constant revolution, stale
And tasteless, of the same repeated joys...

(I, 462-463)

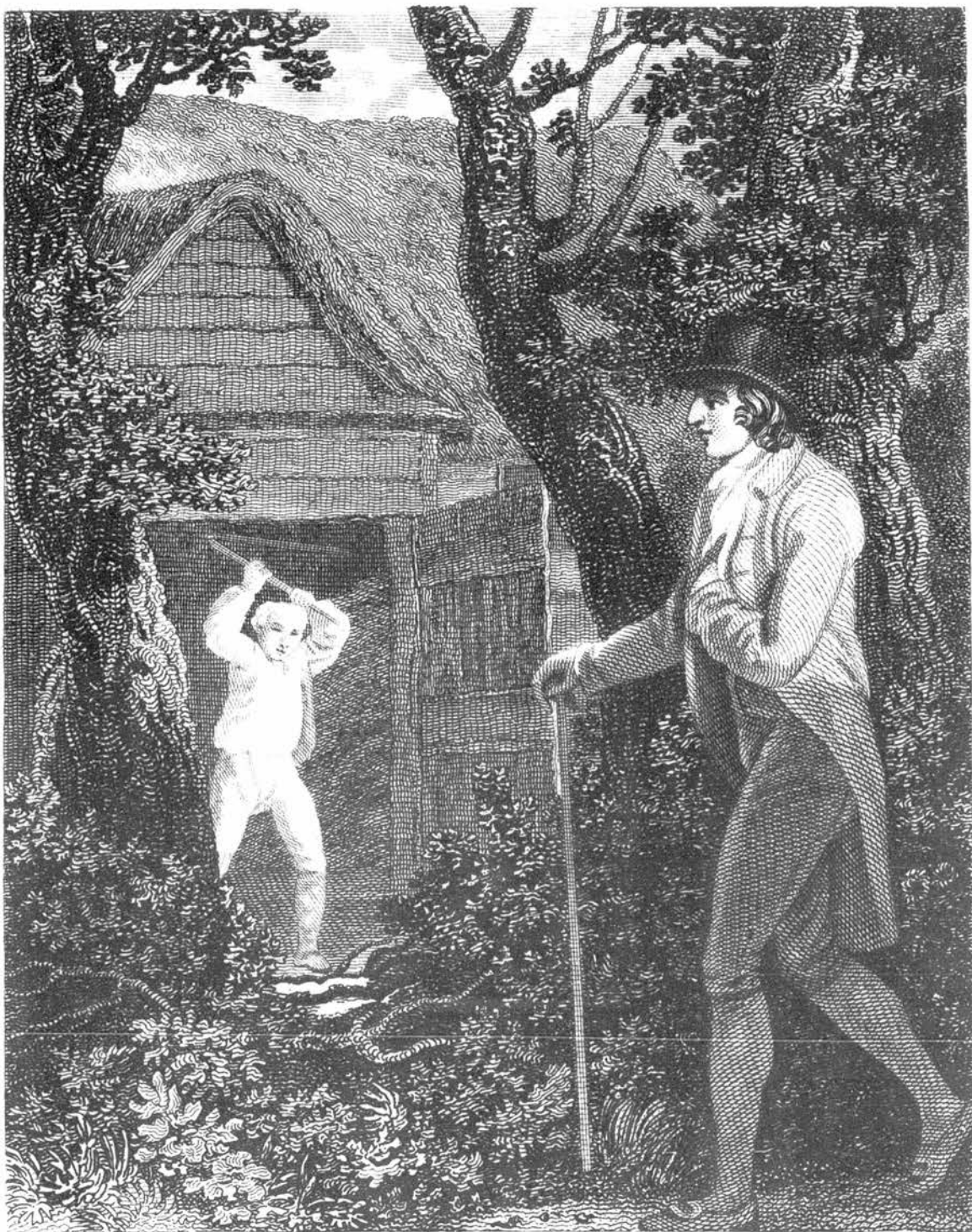
Many aspects of this complex of attitudes may be found in Thomson who also attributes the peace of the labourer to insensibility and describes the joys of rural retirement in order to deprecate urban life. Yet Thomson lacks a sense of exclusion. He is separated from the poor only by his awareness of the natural process in which they unconsciously participate and his enjoyment of nature is not thereby impaired. The country yields almost indiscriminately

Health ever-blooming, unambitious toil,
Calm contemplation, and poetic ease.

(*Autumn*, 1276-1277)

If the division of these lines suggests that contemplation, with its reward of ease, is the poet's equivalent of the labourer's toil and consequent health, yet their pairing indicates that they combine to form the whole that is rural life, compared with which social differences are unimportant enough to be represented by the merest pause between lines.

74. William Cowper, *Poems*, 2 vols (London, 1813-1814), II (1814), facing p. 20.



R. M. Cruz delin.

H. Radford sculp.

*Thump after thump resounds the constant frail
That seems to swing uncertain and yet falls
Full on the destined ear*

Task Book 1st

The elms which divide the poet and the thrasher in *The Task*, on the other hand, are virtually impregnable. Excluded from the innate stability of the poor, despising the artificial gaiety of urban life, experiencing in nature only an occasional sense of 'composure' which 'waits upon' various sights and sounds (I, 190), Cowper seeks an alternative centre of value in domestic retirement. Yet even within the home personal relations are presented in an abstract manner that verges on parody -

the customary rites
Of the last meal commence.
(IV, 167-168)

Here, however, this sense of parody derives not from Cowper's detachment from formality, as in the woodman passage, but from his excessive zeal to justify it by hedging it around with qualifications, denials and defensive assertions -

Discourse ensues, not trivial, yet not dull,
Nor such as with a frown forbids the play
Of fancy, or proscribes the sound of mirth...
(IV, 174-176)

The scene depends on what it excludes for its attractions -

How calm is my recess; and how the frost,
Raging abroad, and the rough wind, endear
The silence and the warmth enjoy'd within!
(IV, 308-310)

The differences between this and a similar passage in Thomson's *Autumn* are instructive -

Pensive Winter...
Sits at the social fire, and happy hears
The excluded tempest idly rave along...
(143-145)

Cowper's freezing, buffeting weather is more real than Thomson's idle tempest. But it is precisely this fact that makes his sanctuary more precarious. Thomson's casual contempt for the storm stems from a self-sufficiency ('Pensive Winter' is quite happy to sit and hear the tempest) which Cowper, stressing the silence and warmth but at the same time needing the wild weather to enhance ('endear') his enjoyment of them, manifestly lacks. Thomson is prepared to acknowledge that this kind of happiness is subdued; pensiveness is an abiding characteristic of his Winter. It is an acknowledgement that Cowper, with his exclamations which convey surprise as much as satisfaction, seeks to deny. Thomson's abstractions are generous in scope; his scene incorporates everyone, describing how

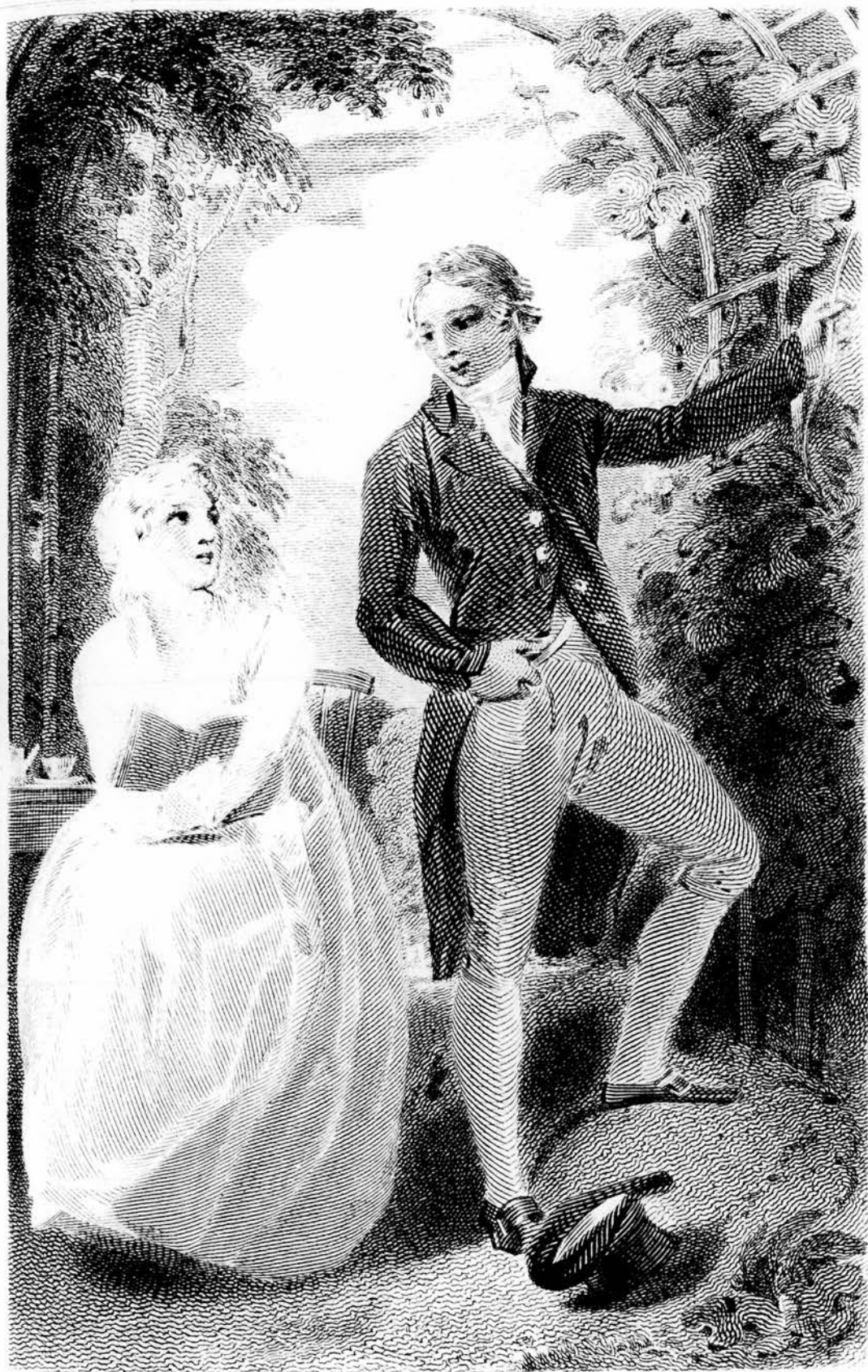
the common experience of winter has been transformed by civilization. Cowper's room is an enclave, possessively appropriated from a wider world ('my recess'); in this context his last line almost suggests an inner experience, jealously guarded.

Cowper's companions are shadowy presences in the poem. Mrs Unwin, who is, for example, omitted from the thresher engraving, is addressed in an awkward, self-conscious manner -

dear companion of my walks,
Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive
Fast lock'd in mine, with pleasure such as love,
Confirm'd by long experience of thy worth
And well-tried virtues, could alone inspire...
(I, 144-148)

Cowper endeavours at once to express his affection and to apologize for it to the reader. Embarrassed by his description of physical proximity, he introduces a clumsy circumlocution that absolves himself from responsibility ('Whose arm this twentieth winter I perceive / Fast lock'd in mine'). He justifies his declaration of love with an unfortunate reference to 'well-tried virtues'. It is not surprising that artists had difficulty in picturing the relationship. Stothard resolved the problem by substituting his own fabrication and representing the pair as youthful lovers; in an engraving of his drawing by Drayton⁷⁵ Mrs Unwin, seated in a bower, looks up at Cowper with unfeigned and blushing adoration while Cowper receives her homage with studied ease. Cowper is never comfortable in any such identifiable relationship or role. He is not 'the private gentleman' of Hazlitt's description, for he would have rejected the urbanity of the figure in Stothard's drawing. His position within a network of personal and social relations is left unresolved but it is the subject of his constant concern. In the absence of an assured sense of direction the poem circles around antitheses that are incomplete, discoveries that are unsatisfying, resolutions that are contingent, certainties that are negative. Cowper remains an observer, constantly searching for an 'abode', such as 'the peasant's nest', and finding only 'a pleasing object'.

75. William Cowper, *Poems*, 2 vols (London, 1798), II, facing p. 96.



L. Stothard Del.

Published Feb. 1st 1798, by J. Johnson, London.

L.R. Draxton Sculp^t

————— where he enjoys,
With her who shares his pleasures & his heart,
Sweet converse

The blank verse of *The Task*, more expansive and more various in its possibilities, at worst merely registers, without structuring, Cowper's nervous uncertainty, allowing a series of qualifications which, as we noted with respect to the description of the winter evening in Book IV, threaten to overpower the initial assertion which they are intended to support. Cowper's blank verse was both praised and blamed for imitating a sequence of thought rather than presenting a considered judgment. I have already quoted one example of criticism from the *Monthly Review*.⁷⁶ Alexander Knox provides an example of typically qualified praise -

The discerning reader will easily perceive that simplicity is a prevailing character in the poetry of Cowper, and that his thoughts appear to retain on paper the very order and shape which they assumed at first in his mind. One consequence of this certainly is that his verses are unequal and that many of his lines, if they stood alone, or were fraught with less noble matter, could not be considered as more than prose which had fallen by accident into a metrical form. In such cases Cowper seems never once to have thought of stopping to correct or improve. He was too powerfully attracted by the objects that lay before him...⁷⁷

Cowper, like Crabbe, was thought by both critics and admirers to be a poet more concerned with his relationship with the external world than with his relationship with his readers, more concerned, that is, with accurate representation than with correct style. However, Cowper's supposed 'stream of consciousness' is never unconscious of the reader. Even the poem's most domestic moments, such as the opening of Book IV which Knox quotes as an introduction to his comment, are public rather than private -

HARK! 'tis the twanging horn! O'er yonder bridge,
That with its wearisome but needful length
Bestrides the wintry flood...
He comes...

(IV, 1-3, 5)

Admittedly the verse does succeed in recreating Cowper's frustrated eagerness for the mail by concentrating on the bridge, playfully castigated as 'wearisome', which delays the arrival of the postman until line five. Yet Cowper also feels a need to stress the comedy at his own expense by means of the mock-heroic 'twanging horn' and mock-solemn qualification of his reproach of the bridge ('wearisome but needful'). The modest and childlike

76. See p. 161.

77. Alexander Knox, *The Flapper*, 30 (14 May, 1796); Elledge, II, p. 1108.

personality that invents a little drama of a long-awaited postman and a teasing bridge is all but obscured by the poet's effort to assure the reader that he is aware of the episode's triviality. Of course, to reviewers still accustomed to a poetic ideal of impersonal generality such a naked contest between the personal and the impersonal might well have seemed a representation of the poet's private thoughts but to the modern reader, familiar with more literal attempts at 'stream of consciousness', the poet as private man seems less in evidence than the poet as public rhetorician.

Cowper chose blank verse for *The Task* because it was 'susceptible of a much greater diversification of manner, than verse in rhyme'.⁷⁸ He had always been a poet of 'the familiar style' which he described as making

verse speak the language of prose, without being prosaic, to marshall the words of it in such an order as they might naturally take in falling from the lips of an extemporary speaker, yet without meanness; harmoniously, elegantly, and without seeming to displace a syllable for the sake of the rhyme, is one of the most arduous tasks a poet can undertake.⁷⁹

In his earlier heroic couplets Cowper tended to pursue the familiar style to the extent that the rhythm and rhyme often seemed perfunctory. For example, in the following description of the lace-maker in 'Truth' the tendency of the couplet towards antithetical and conclusive construction is merely an unwanted distraction -

She, for her humble sphere by nature fit,
Has little understanding, and no wit,
Receives no praise...

(323-325)

The verse form implies a contrast between 'understanding' and 'wit' where similarity is intended and the emphasis on 'no wit', which might condemn the lace-maker or even, for witless fitting, nature itself, is discounted by the lame continuation of the couplet. Perhaps it is appropriate that the verse, like the lace-maker herself, should receive no praise. Cowper's misuse of the couplet questions the premium which the form places on wit, just as his celebration of the lace-maker is intended to do. Yet paradox

78. Letter to John Newton (11 December, 1784); King and Ryskamp, II (1981), p. 308.

79. Letter to William Unwin (17 January, 1782); *ibid.*, p. 10.

is not a form of simplicity and though Cowper's style attempted to convey a frank, artless, unwitty tone, the verse form worked against the suggestion of a simple voice.

The Task, on the other hand, might sometimes verge on soliloquy to an extent that was disconcerting to contemporary reviewers, who considered blank verse a public form, but Cowper rarely soliloquizes. At best the familiar style and the tendency of blank verse to sententiousness work against each other to evoke a sense of controlled uncertainty, hinting at a complex reality that eludes more explicit poetic formulation. This might seem to suggest a further similarity between Cowper and Crabbe but whereas Crabbe suggests the inadequacy of language to record reality by emphasizing the mechanical nature of the couplet, Cowper questions such a separation of language and reality by demonstrating how language structures experience. It is difficult, for example, to disentangle a real woodman from the brave knight and mindless automaton which the clash of styles brings into being. Cowper distrusted expectations of harmony, as if uniformity of style imposed too smooth a sequence from the difficult perception to the final evaluation -

A critic of the present day serves a poem as a cook does a dead turkey, when she fastens the legs of it to a post and draws out all the sinews.⁸⁰

The prosaic details in the portraits of the woodman and crazy Kate, which prevent conclusive judgment just as they resist absorption into a poetic style, are the sinews which refuse to be drawn out, a sign that the turkey has not been completely cooked. If Cowper's emphasis is finally, like Crabbe's, on a reality that eludes poetry, his ideal measure of reality is not impersonal history but unconstrained perception; his ideal poetry is not a record which incorporates all details but a language which registers experience untainted by convention. If Cowper's ideal is as impossible as Crabbe's, nevertheless the quest for a consistent voice which it provokes allows Cowper's extreme self-consciousness sometimes to transform itself into a salutary inconclusiveness.

80. Letter to Joseph Johnson, [1784]; Wright, II, p. 286.

Chapter 6

Robert Burns

No man should avow rakery who does not possess an estate of 500£ a year.

(Letter from John Logan to Henry Mackenzie, 28 February, 1787)

As we have already observed, Wordsworth claimed both Cowper and Burns as his poetic predecessors. However, although their different influences were combined in Wordsworth's innovatory style, their respective originality cannot be explained in similar terms. Cowper developed his techniques in determined isolation, both physical and literary. Burns, on the other hand, confronted the English literary milieu as the representative of an essentially foreign culture, Scottish, rural and 'low', although he did so with the authority of poetic excellence. If his authority was his own, his originality was largely that of his culture. The distinction can best be illustrated by means of Cowper's own response to Burns -

I have...read Burns's poems, and have read them twice; and though they be written in a language that is new to me, and many of them on subjects much inferior to the author's ability, I think them on the whole a very extraordinary production. He is I believe the only poet these kingdoms have produced in the lower rank of life since Shakespeare (I should rather say since Prior,) who need not be indebted for any part of his praise to a charitable consideration of his origin, and the disadvantages under which he has laboured. It will be a pity if he should not hereafter divest himself of barbarism, and content himself with writing pure English, in which he appears perfectly qualified to excel. He, who can command admiration, dishonours himself if he aims no higher than to raise a laugh.¹

Thomas Crawford has recently suggested that the difference between English and Scots vernacular was not a matter of 'different languages, but rather different registers or levels of usage within the same language'.² However,

1. Letter to Samuel Rose, 24 July, 1787, in *Robert Burns: The Critical Heritage*, edited by Donald A. Low (London, 1974), p. 91.

2. Thomas Crawford, *Society and the Lyric: A Study of the Song Culture of Eighteenth-century Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1979), p. 11.

as we shall see, it was only after Burns's death that his use of language was discussed as a poetic style rather than lamented as one of the disadvantages of his origins. Cowper's reservations all relate to the manner in which Burns's poetry differed from the prevailing mode of polite English literature - his use of the vernacular, his 'low' subject-matter, his colloquial humour. These differences were more cultural than individual. Therefore in order to understand how English literary culture eventually accommodated Burns it is necessary to begin with a wide perspective.

Eighteenth-century Scotland was a hybrid country, divided in itself, geographically and culturally, between the Highlands and Lowlands and uncertain, perhaps ever since the loss of the Scottish court in 1603, of its national identity and cultural aspirations within Britain. English commentators wavered between contempt and surprise at what seemed to them to be the incompatibilities of Scottish society and Scots, in response, were sometimes defiant and sometimes apologetic. During the course of his tour of Scotland in 1773 Johnson wrote -

I know not whether it be not peculiar to the Scots to have attained the liberal, without the manual arts, to have excelled in ornamental knowledge, and to have wanted not only the elegancies, but the conveniences of common life... Till the Union made them acquainted with English manners, the culture of their lands was unskillful, and their domestick life unformed; their tables were coarse as the feasts of Eskimeaux, and their houses filthy as the cottages of Hottentots.³

What was to Johnson the belated acquisition of elementary amenities, however, seemed to William Mackintosh of Borlum to be capitulation to a foreign and effeminate culture -

[I]n lieu of the big quaigh with strong ale and toast and after a dram of good wholesome Scots spirits, there is now the tea-kettle put on the fire, the tea-table, and silver and china equipage brought in with the marmalade, cream and cold tea... God forbid we should expect no better improvement from the Union...⁴

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3. Samuel Johnson, *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland*, edited by Mary Lascelles (New Haven and London, 1971), p. 28.
 4. William Mackintosh, *An Essay on Ways and Means for Inclosing* (Edinburgh, 1729), quoted in T.C. Smout, *A History of the Scottish People 1560-1830*, second edition (London, 1970), pp. 285-286.

The Union of Parliaments in 1707 endeavoured to bring together two cultures in a marriage which seemed only to emphasize their differences. Against the solid monosyllables and simple syntax of Mackintosh's prose Johnson's periods seem affectedly Latinate; against Johnson's careful distinctions and cerebral generalities Mackintosh's aggressive adjectives and his scornful emphasis of Anglicized French ('equipage') seem limited and provincial. Anglo-Scottish relations often appeared to consist essentially of accusatory exchanges of hyperbole, from Hottentots to cold tea, within a context of mutual incomprehension. Yet Mackintosh's aggression is also directed at the Scottish gentry who had begun to define elegance in terms of English manners and thus were encouraging the identification of Scottish customs and language with vulgarity. The friendship between Boswell and Johnson was in many ways paradigmatic of the growing relationship between Scotland and England that belied the conventional expressions of hostility. Boswell, like Scots generally, was alternately awed, amused, and competitive and Johnson, like the English, was sometimes pompous, sometimes overbearing. At the beginning of his journal of the Scottish tour which he took with Johnson Boswell wrote -

I subscribe to what my late truly learned and philosophical friend Mr. Crosbie said, that the English are better animals than the Scots; they are nearer the sun; their blood is richer, and more mellow: but when I humour any of them in an outrageous contempt of Scotland, I fairly own I treat them as children. And thus I have, at some moments, found myself obliged to treat even Dr. Johnson.⁵

'The land of itch and oatmeal' - thus Southey dismissed Scotland in a letter to John Rickman in 1805, citing Johnson in support.⁶ However, by 1805 the balance of cultural prestige between England and Scotland had changed. *The Edinburgh Review* had begun publication in 1803 and its founders had not felt constrained to ape the major English periodicals in the manner of the *Scots Magazine*. Its success encouraged a proliferation

5. James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, edited by G.B. Hill, revised by L.F. Powell, second edition, 6 vols (Oxford, 1964-1971), V (1964), p. 20.

6. Letter to John Rickman (27 October, 1805), in *New Letters of Robert Southey*, edited by Kenneth Curry, 2 vols (New York, 1965), I, p. 406.

of similar publishing ventures, such as *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, *Fraser's Magazine* and *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*. The literary and political hostilities which the *Edinburgh Review* aroused helps to explain Southey's animus against Scotland, as much as the traditional rivalries which its aggressive style of reviewing exacerbated; in his letter to Rickman Southey refers to Jeffrey's unfavourable review of *Thalaba*. The *Critical Review*, one of the principal Tory magazines, in 1808 derided 'the provincial zeal so strongly exerted among the literary circles of Edinburgh in favour of every thing *exclusively* Scottish'.⁷ The emphasis which this hostile reviewer placed on the 'provincial' character of the Edinburgh literary circles is perhaps sufficient evidence of the contrary claims being put forward in them. It was Jeffrey and his colleagues, more than the cosmopolitan philosophers and academics associated with the Scottish Enlightenment, who introduced a period of cultural confidence in Scotland that was unashamedly nationalist.

It was probably Burns who provided the basis for that confidence. At least, so thought J.G. Lockhart -

[T]he poetry of Burns has had most powerful influence in reviving and strengthening the national feelings of his countrymen.⁸

In any case, Scottish nationalism manifested itself in continual assertions of the superiority of the Scottish poor. In a review of James Grahame's *British Georgics* Jeffrey wrote -

[T]he rustics of Scotland are a far more interesting race, and far fitter subjects for poetry than their brethren of the same condition in the South. They are much more thoughtful, pious and intelligent - have more delicacy in their affections, and more reflecting, patient and serious kindness in their natures. To say all in a word, they are far less *brutish* than the great body of English peasantry. At the same time, from being poorer and more lonely, their characters and way of life are more truly simple, while the very want of comfort and accommodation with which they are sometimes surrounded, holds more of the antique age, and connects them more closely with

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7. Unsigned review of Allan Ramsay, *The Gentle Shepherd*, 2 vols (London and Edinburgh, 1808), *Critical Review*, 3rd ser., 15, 3 (November, 1808), 225-237, p. 225.
 8. J.G. Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns* (1828); Low, p. 345.

those primitive times, with the customs and even the history of which they are still so generally familiar.⁹

John Wilson attributed this superiority to the piety of the Scottish poor -

[T]he language of Scripture is so familiar to the minds of the peasantry, that it is often adopted unconsciously in the conversation of common hours; in short, all the forms, modes, shews of life are, in a great measure, either moulded or coloured by Religion.¹⁰

But he also conceded that a contributing factor was the national system of education. The establishment of a school in every parish had been a legal requirement in Scotland since the middle of the seventeenth century; a number of statutes were passed in an endeavour to compel recalcitrant parishes to comply with the requirement. Though the law was largely ignored in the Highlands, there was a school in every Lowland parish by 1760 and these were supplemented by charity schools in the larger parishes.¹¹

Attention was drawn with such emphasis to the Scottish poor because on this point Scottish superiority could be asserted without much fear of contradiction. As John Wilson put it, 'all enlightened foreigners have been impressed with a sense of the grandeur of such a national character'.¹² Many English visitors to Scotland noticed the piety and politeness of the poor. Johnson wrote -

[T]here are many beggars in Scotland. In Edinburgh the proportion is, I think, not less than in London, and in the smaller places it is far greater than in English towns of the same extent. It must, however, be allowed that they are not importunate, nor clamorous. They solicit silently, or very modestly...¹³

When Crabbe visited Scott in Edinburgh in 1822, he wrote similarly -

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9. Francis Jeffrey, review of James Grahame, *British Georgics* (1809), *Edinburgh Review*, 16 (April, 1810), 213-233, pp. 216-217.
 10. John Wilson, 'Some Observations on the Poetry of the Agricultural and that of the Pastoral Districts of Scotland', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 4, 23 (February, 1819), 521-529, p. 521.
 11. See M.G. Jones, *The Charity School Movement*, pp. 165-214; Smout, pp. 449-466.
 12. John Wilson, 'Some Observations', p. 521.
 13. Lascelles, p. 12.

I could not but remark the civility and urbanity of the Scotch poor: they certainly exceed ours in politeness, arising, probably, from minds more generally cultivated.¹⁴

William Gilpin attributed the 'virtuous disposition' and 'independent spirit' of the Highlander to the fact that there were no poor rates in Scotland.¹⁵ While food riots broke out periodically between 1780 and 1830 in England, the rural Scots were regarded as remarkably docile, in spite of the fact that the social pressures caused by 'improvement' were fairly similar in Scotland and England.¹⁶ After his tour of Scotland in 1830 Cobbett concluded, as Gilpin had done, that the Scottish agricultural labourer had been constrained by his dependence on charity when unemployed.¹⁷ In his Poor Law Bill of 1807 Samuel Whitbread, in an attempt to prevent the decline in morality that was commonly supposed to accompany reliance on the poor rates, proposed to institute a parish system of education supported by the rates, citing Scotland as the proof of its beneficial effects.¹⁸ John Evans agreed -

That the diffusion of knowledge among the people, is attended with real and substantial benefit, appears from the general character of the Scotch, who are distinguished for sobriety of manners.¹⁹

However, this unanimity of English opinion concerning the Scottish poor did not have a long pedigree. To some English visitors earlier in the eighteenth century the poor, because of their reticence and unorthodox appearance, were a race apart -

14. Broadley and Jerrold, p. 264.

15. William Gilpin, *Observations on the Highlands of Scotland* (1789), 2 vols, facsimile reprint (Richmond, 1973), I, p. 214.

16. The docility of the Scottish poor may have been exaggerated: see James D. Young, *The Rising of the Scottish Working Class* (London, 1979), pp. 41-71.

17. See Smout, p. 303.

18. J.R. Poynter, *Society and Pauperism: English Ideas on Poor Relief, 1795-1834* (London, 1969), p. 209. See also William Hazlitt, *A Reply to Malthus's Essay on Population*; Howe, I (1930), pp. 183-185.

19. John Evans, *The Importance of Educating the Poor*, second edition (Canterbury, 1808), p. 11.

The common people are such in outward appearance as you would not take them at first to be of the human species, and in their lives they differ little from the brutes...²⁰

As James Currie put it in the preface to his life of Burns, 'the manners and appearance of the Scottish peasantry do not bespeak to a stranger, the degree of their cultivation'.²¹ Thomas Somerville, one of the king's chaplains in Scotland, referred with embarrassment to the fact that 'before the year 1760 none of the poor, or only a small proportion of them, wore stockings' but he was relieved to be able to report that since that time, 'among all classes, as great an improvement has taken place with respect to dress as in almost any other article'.²² It is perhaps not fortuitous that Somerville noticed over the same period 'growing increase of attention to the sufferings of the poor'.²³ As their outward appearance seemed increasingly to correspond in neatness to their inner humility, the Scottish poor moved closer to the ideal of pious industry that, as we have seen, was being at that time vigorously promoted in England. Calvinist Presbyterianism and Calvinist Evangelicalism coincided in the attempt to define the qualities that would render the poor deserving of attention and admiration.²⁴ The one poem most responsible for popularizing the exemplary image of the Scottish poor, the poem to which nearly every commentator on the subject referred, was Burns's 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'.

Gilpin, for instance, in illustration of his praise of the Highlander, quotes the entire poem.²⁵ Wilson was willing to concede that

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20. *Gentleman's Magazine* (1766), 211, quoted in Henry Grey Graham, *The Social Life of Scotland in the Eighteenth Century*, fifth edition (London, 1969), p. 178n.
 21. James Currie, 'Prefatory Remarks', *The Works of Robert Burns*, 4 vols (Liverpool, 1800), I, p. 22.
 22. Thomas Somerville, *My Own Life and Times, 1741-1814* (Edinburgh, 1861), pp. 325-326.
 23. *Ibid.*, p. 384.
 24. On the influence of George Whitefield in Scotland, see Albert Belden, *George Whitefield - The Awakener*, second edition (London, 1953), pp. 133-143.
 25. William Gilpin, *Observations on the Highlands of Scotland*, I, pp. 215-221.

the fireside of an English cottage is often a scene of happiness and virtue; but unquestionably, in reading the 'Cottar's Saturday Night' of Burns, we feel, that we are reading the records of a purer, simpler, more pious race...²⁶

Robert Heron, Burns's first biographer, wrote in 1793 -

'The Cotter's Saturday Night', which is really a faithful description from the life, proves, that the manners of our rustics can afford subjects for pastoral poetry more elevated and more amiable than those which are exhibited in Gay's 'Shepherd's Week'...²⁷

According to David Irving, the poem's 'characters and incidents...are such as may every where be found among the virtuous and intelligent peasantry of Scotland'.²⁸

This chorus of praise is hardly surprising. Rarely in poetry has the good will of the reader been so assiduously solicited and his expectations so fully satisfied as in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night'. Burns's stated purpose at the outset of the poem is to demonstrate the moral superiority of cottage life in such a way that the cultivated reader, represented in the poem by Robert Aiken, a solicitor and an early patron of Burns, would be willing to emulate the cotter. To this end Burns is anxious to establish his credentials before a polite audience, whether Scots or English, that relied for standards of excellence on English literature. The poem is sprinkled liberally with references to Pope, Gray and Goldsmith and at its most solemn, when, for instance, Burns is directly addressing Aiken or summarizing biblical themes, its style is wholly English. The poem's characters are defined by those qualities which formed the themes of much of the poetry of Cowper, Burns's contemporary - the cotter is characterized by his industriousness and piety, his wife by her thrift and devotion, their children by their modesty and obedience. An imitation criticizing the poor man's fondness for Booth's gin and Barclay's beer was published in 1830²⁹ and in 1831 the

26. John Wilson, 'Some Observations'; Low, p. 310.

27. Robert Heron, *Observations made in a Journey through the Western Counties of Scotland* (Perth, 1793); *ibid.*, p. 97.

28. David Irving, *The Lives of the Scottish Poets* (1804); *ibid.*, p. 164.

29. Henry Brown, *The Mechanic's Saturday Night* (London, 1830).

poem was 'translated' into English 'for the use of the poorer classes in England'.³⁰ Burns, as his influence suggests, was concerned to advertize his subject and this attitude informs the most mundane details of the poem; he describes supper, for example, as 'the healsome *Porritch*, chief of SCOTIA's food' (92).³¹ Fergusson, by contrast, in the poem which was Burns's immediate model, establishes the wholesomeness of his farmer's food by implicit rather than assertive recommendation, describing it within the context of a busy, steaming kitchen -

Wi' butter'd *bannocks* now the *girdle* reeks,
 I' the far nook the *bowie* briskly reams;
 The readied *kail* stand by the chimley cheeks,
 And had the riggin het wi' welcome steams...
 ('The Farmer's Ingle', 23-26)³²

Whereas Burns's porridge is merely nutritious, Fergusson's supper seems almost active with the vitality of robust health. Burns could not afford this kind of detail because of the risk of offending an audience to whom the association of food with kitchens was more remote. He carefully precludes offence by qualifying every description - the family prepares for the reading 'wi' serious face' (100); the cotter opens the bible 'with patriarchal grace' (102), laying aside 'his bonnet rev'rently' (104) and reading 'with judicious care' and 'solemn air' (107-108). By this profusion of adjectives and adverbs Burns determines the reading of the poem, continually intervening to emphasize the proper response - 'They tune their hearts, by far the noblest aim' (110).

Burns's emphasis in the poem on the 'heart' as the source of the moral sense belongs to the cult of sensibility and explains the appearance of the villainous seducer (82-90), a stock figure in sentimental literature whose very inhumanity serves to confirm the fundamental benevolence of ordinary folk. One of Burns's favourite books, 'a book', he wrote, 'I

30. *The Cotter's Saturday Night* (Frome, 1831).

31. *The Poems and Songs of Robert Burns*, edited by James Kinsley, 3 vols (Oxford, 1968), I, p. 148. All quotations from Burns's poetry are from this edition.

32. *The Poems of Robert Fergusson*, edited by M.P. McDiarmid, 2 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1954-1956), II (1956), p. 137.

prize next to the Bible',³³ was Henry Mackenzie's popular novel, *The Man of Feeling* (1771). In the sentimental manner the novel presents itself as a test of the reader's virtue and, as Burns's comment suggests, admiration for it was a testament of character. It consists of a series of loosely connected stories interposed, as is Burns's poem, with indications of the required response -

The old man now paused a moment to take breath. He eyed Harley's face; it was bathed in tears; the story was grown familiar to himself; he dropped one tear and no more.³⁴

The old man's pause typifies the novelist's manner, emotional with a furtive and conscious detachment. While cultivating the excess of uncontrolled feeling, he also endeavours to calibrate sensibility, from one tear to many. The endeavour is so apparent, however, that the reader is able to choose, with a similar deliberation, the response that will prove his own worth. One of the first and most influential reviews of Burns's poems was written by Mackenzie -

In the view of highly superior talents, as in that of great and stupendous natural objects, there is a sublimity which fills the soul with wonder and delight, which expands it, as it were, beyond its usual bounds, and which, investing our nature with extraordinary powers, and extraordinary honours, interests our curiosity, and flatters our pride.³⁵

In describing Burns as a 'Heaven-taught ploughman',³⁶ a kind of animated 'natural object', Mackenzie was responding to the way in which poems such as 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' repress any traces of individuality that might hinder the satisfaction of the reader's emotional expectations.

But if 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' generally flatters the reader in the sentimental manner, Burns allowed himself at one point to be more aggressively 'democratic', equating the aristocrat with the seducer as the villain of melodrama -

33. Letter to John Murdoch (15 September, 1783), in *The Letters of Robert Burns*, edited by J. De Lancey Ferguson, 2 vols (Oxford, 1931), I, p. 14.

34. Henry Mackenzie, *The Man of Feeling*, edited by Brian Vickers (London, 1967), p. 89.

35. Henry Mackenzie, *Lounger*, 97 (9 December, 1786); Low, p. 67.

36. *Ibid.*, p. 70.

What is a lordling's pomp? a cumbrous load,
Disguising oft the *wretch* of human kind,
Studied in arts of Hell, in wickedness refin'd!
(169-171)

Significantly it is this passage alone that attracted criticism -

Our moral nature revolts with a sense of injustice from the comparison of the wickedness of one class with the goodness of another; and the effect is the very opposite of that intended, the rising up of a miserable conviction that for a while had been laid asleep, that vice and crime are not excluded from cots, but often, alas! are found there in their darkest colours and most portentous forms.³⁷

Wilson's objection to these lines alone suggests that he is otherwise content to be 'laid asleep', in his own revealing words, by Burns's accommodating manner. His criticism does not merely compare the falsity of this passage with the truth of the rest of the poem; he also rebels against the poet's intentions becoming too intrusively obvious and blunt. It is Burns's animus, a reminder of an individual author with which the reader must attempt to come to terms, that upsets Wilson.

'Saint' or 'ranter' were alternative images of the poet common to Scots verse. One of Burns's contemporaries, John Learmont, a journeyman gardener, published an answer to a poem which was itself a hostile reply to Burns's 'Address to the Deil'. It included the following advice -

Flee straught to Lon'on, or St. Peter's place.
An' for my blessin' learn some better grace:
For gif ye stay ye'll whiggish rites embrace,
An' roar an' rant,
Syne turn the biggest rascal i' the place,
Or Psuedo Saint.

Or Psuedo Saint.
('Answer to the De'il's Reply to Mr. Burns', 37-42) ³⁸

In many ways Burns also felt able to choose between the stances of ranter or 'Psuedo Saint', as though he were less concerned with the moral principles they represented than with the dramatic possibilities they opened up. He sometimes looked to London for his imprimatur; sometimes he was defiantly coarse. Burns's temperamental idiosyncrasies responded to ambivalences inherent in eighteenth-century Scots vernacular poetry.

37. John Wilson, 'The Genius and Character of Burns'; Ferrier, VII (1857), p. 33.

38. John Learmont, *Poems, Pastoral, Satirical, Tragic, and Comic* (Edinburgh, 1791), p. 219.

The very title of the most famous early eighteenth-century Scots pastoral, *The Gentle Shepherd*, suggests ambivalence. Occasionally, in the manner of its plot, which, in crude summary, works toward the revelation that two rustic lovers are of noble birth, the poem seems to aspire to elegance in spite of its colloquial style; elsewhere it depends on coarseness for its vitality. Sometimes it appears as though two languages are being deliberately juxtaposed -

Jenny. But what if some young Giglit on the Green,
With dimpled Cheeks, and twa bewitching Een,
Should gar your *Patie* think his haff-worn *Meg*,
And her kend Kisses, hardly worth a *Feg*?

Peggy. Nae mair of that; - dear *Jenny*, to be free,
There's some Men constanter in Love than we:
Nor is the Ferly great, when Nature kind
Has blest them with Solidity of Mind.

(I, ii, 163-170)

Ramsay is here almost totally preoccupied with expressing a sense of social distance between Jenny, a shepherd's daughter, and Peggy, ostensibly her cousin but actually of noble birth. Peggy's speech contains little substance to match its 'solid' manner, the purpose of which is to establish her superior breeding. Her aphoristic couplets imitate an English style against which Jenny's speech, with its forthright rhymes of 'Meg' and 'Feg', only offends. Yet it is Peggy who, rebuking Jenny and then apologizing for the freedom she takes with her own unexceptionable language, is, unintentionally, comic; her politeness is no more than a mannerism. Ramsay fails to establish Peggy's speech as a standard of gentility, however roughened by environment, and thus cannot render his shifts in style plausible. John Aikin was therefore able to complain that

the sentiments and manners are far from being entirely proper to the characters, and while some descend so low as to be disgusting, others are elevated far beyond nature.³⁹

The way in which the language of the passage quoted dramatizes 'flyting' Jenny while leaving Peggy untouched suggests a division between Ramsay's conscious intention, which is to establish Peggy's superiority, and his unconscious sympathy with Jenny's vitality.

This division is even more pronounced in the poem which most influenced

39. John Aikin, *Essays on Song-Writing* (London, [1772]), p. 33.

The Gentle Shepherd.⁴⁰ Gay's intention in *The Shepherd's Week* is hidden in the irony of the preface; he opposes the 'delicacy' of those who, like Pope, would confine pastoral to the Golden Age to the 'plain downright hearty cleanly Folk' of his poem. That he pretends to find such delicacy 'insipid' is proof of his real purpose, which is to demonstrate that there is no elegance in contemporary rural life and that to base poetry on it is as ridiculous as attempting to combine the language of the court and that of the country. Yet the actual poetry wavers between outright parody and a simple directness which, by implicitly questioning the value of elegance, makes the parody irrelevant -

When-e'er you mow'd I follow'd with the Rake,
And have full oft been Sun-burnt for thy Sake...
(*'Tuesday; or, The Ditty'*, 61-62)

One sees the intended irony. Marian's declaration of devotion is woefully understated. But then that is also its charm. Her devotion needs no embellishment. If her declaration is naive, it is because it is unpremeditated. Her lack of 'delicacy', a quality to which she conspicuously does not aspire, leaves her nature relatively uninhibited. The obvious rhyme, the excess of 'full oft', the bluntness of 'Sun-burnt' court the reader's scorn with such vulnerability that we hesitate to comply. Sophistication begins to seem synonymous with insincerity.

It must also be admitted that, despite the evident similarities, the stylistic discordances involved in Gay's attempt to combine the languages of court and country do not manifest cultural divisions as deep as those indicated by Ramsay's amalgam of English and Scots. A closer parallel may perhaps be drawn with the effort to introduce provincial dialects into English poetry. In spite of the authority of Spenser the use of dialect in pastoral never became respectable in the eighteenth century. As a result of Pope's ridicule in his *Guardian* essay it tended to be confined to comic poems, even though some, like Thomas Purney, misinterpreting the essay, had regarded Pope's exercise in dialect as proof of the essayist's excellent taste.⁴¹ The use of dialect became an ironic means of maintaining

40. For Gay's influence on Ramsay, see Kinghorn and Law, IV (1970), pp. 90-92; A.J. Sambrook, 'An Essay on Eighteenth-Century Pastoral, Pope to Wordsworth' (I), p. 30.

41. White, p. 3.

the dominance of London, as in Peter Pindar's 'Modes of Courtship' -

Lord, Joan, a man may be *alive*,
 Ha a long puss, and kep a wive,
 That ne'er zeed Lundun zitty.
 (10-12)⁴²

More serious uses of dialect, such as Josiah Relph's pastorals in the Cumberland dialect,⁴³ were hampered by an adventitious air of experimentation.

The essential argument about the use of dialect in poetry was put by Charles Lamb in a letter to Clare in 1822 -

Now and then a home rusticism is fresh & startling, but where nothing is gained in expression, it is out of tenor. It may make folks smile and stare, but the ungenial coalition of barbarous with refined phrases will prevent you in the end from being so generally tasted as you deserve to be.⁴⁴

However just the argument in England, its transposition to Scotland was inappropriate; Scots vernacular was more or less a national language and hence its use in poetry evoked more than a sense of quaint and unfamiliar rusticity. Although in the seventeenth century the vernacular had become a comic and 'low' poetic form in Scotland, it was still a reminder of a past when Scottish culture had been European in importance. Mixed motives therefore informed the eighteenth-century miscellanies of old Scots ballads, compiled by James Watson between 1706 and 1711 and by Ramsay himself in 1724. They were, in David Daiches's words, 'antiquarian, patriotic and patronizing'.⁴⁵ Ramsay 'improved' the ballads in his *Tea Table Miscellany* in order to make them more respectable, that is, more English; the very title of his collection suggests both its milieu and its function. By acquainting themselves with the old songs the Scottish gentry sought to retain a distinct identity while adopting English manners but in this period there was something frivolous and mock-

42. *The Works of Peter Pindar*, 5 vols (1794-1801), IV (1796), p. 281.

43. Josiah Relph, *A Miscellany of Poems* (Glasgow, 1747).

44. Quoted in J.W. and Anne Tibble, *John Clare: A Life*, second edition (London, 1972), p. 181.

45. David Daiches, 'Eighteenth-century Vernacular Poetry', in *Scottish Poetry: A Critical Survey*, edited by James Kinsley (London, 1955), pp. 150-184, p. 151. See also John Butt, 'The Revival of vernacular Scottish Poetry in the Eighteenth Century'; Hilles and Bloom, pp. 219-237.

pastoral in the attempt. James Beattie's criticism of *The Gentle Shepherd* - Ramsay's 'passion for the *Rus verum* betrays him into some indelicacies'⁴⁶ - seems to suggest that the poem does not evince the proper social detachment. The Scottishness of *The Gentle Shepherd* was not always sufficiently muted for its more sophisticated readers.

For similar reasons Burns's use of Scots was, as we have seen, initially regarded as an unfortunate result of his origins.⁴⁷ After his death, however, commentators began to suggest that his version of the vernacular 'hardly ever transgressed the propriety of English grammar'.⁴⁸ This apologetic tone gradually became more assertive. James Currie, Burns's first editor, pointed out that the language of the poetry had not prevented its general circulation in England.⁴⁹ Indeed there were over one hundred separate printings of Burns's poetry in England between 1787 and 1835.⁵⁰ Scots vernacular came to be regarded as an aspect of Burns's

46. James Beattie, *Essays* (Edinburgh, 1776), p. 119.

47. See p. 168 and see also Henry Mackenzie, *Lounger*, 97 (9 December, 1786); Low, p. 69; James Anderson, *Monthly Review*, 85 (December, 1786), 439-448; *ibid.*, p. 72.

48. Robert Heron, *A Memoir of the Life of the Late Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1797); *ibid.*, p. 127.

49. James Currie, 'Criticism on the writings of Burns', *The Works of Robert Burns*; *ibid.*, pp. 150-151.

50. See J.W. Egerer, *A Bibliography of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh and London, 1964). *The Gentle Shepherd* had also been fairly popular with the English, even in the eighteenth century. Booth's company of Carlisle, a company of actors which Thomas Holcroft joined in 1774, had originally toured the north of England with a repertoire comprising nothing but Ramsay's play (Howe, III (1932), pp. 77-78). Admittedly, the founder of that company had been a Scot but that his concentrated repertoire was more than an isolated instance of patriotic zeal is demonstrated by an account in the *Universal Magazine* of a performance of the play at Drury Lane on 29 October, 1781. With its more obscure parts translated into English by a Mr Tickel, 'the Piece was received with great applause, and promises to become a very favourite entertainment with the town' (*Universal Magazine*, 69 (November, 1781), 237). The actors were apparently not 'unsuccessful in attaining the peculiarities of the Northern dialect'. Translations of the play into English were published by Cornelius Vanderstop in 1777, by W. Ward about 1785, and by Margaret Turner in 1790. The British Library holds a copy of *The Gentle Shepherd* (Edinburgh, 1755) interleaved with copious ms notes by William Shenstone; Shenstone concludes by remarking that 'many words of the old Scotch Dialect have an extremely good effect'.

authenticity and dislike of it was designated 'accidental, not natural'.⁵¹ Finally, Jeffrey was able to enlist Burns, without reservation, in the cause of Scottish nationalism -

[W]e may perhaps be allowed to say, that the Scotch is, in reality, a highly poetical language; and that it is an ignorant, as well as an illiberal prejudice, which would seek to confound it with the barbarous dialects of Yorkshire or Devon.⁵²

It was perhaps partly because of this change in Burns's reputation that the use of dialect became more common generally in the nineteenth century; even 'the barbarous dialects of Yorkshire or Devon' became respectable. The occasional dialect words of Bloomfield's 'The Horkey' and Clare's poetry were succeeded by the full dialect of Cumberland poets such as Robert Anderson and John Rayson, the Yorkshire poems of John Castillo and the Dorset poems of William Barnes.⁵³

The question of Burns's social origins was crucial to his reputation. Initially his low birth and, in particular, his lack of a liberal education were regarded as disadvantages for which allowance had to be made in criticism.⁵⁴ If Burns were a genius, it was widely thought, it was because his poetry so largely, though not wholly, transcended his origins.⁵⁵ Because his achievement was being measured by the extent to which he had overcome social obstacles, disputes arose as to whether, with his evident knowledge of English poetry, he could in fact be described as uneducated.⁵⁶ When his reputation became more established, however, accounts of the piety and literacy of the Scottish peasants began to take

51. James Currie, 'Criticism on the writings of Burns'; Low, p. 151.

52. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 13 (January, 1809), 249-276; *ibid.*, pp. 186-187.

53. For the popularity of dialect amongst working-class poets after 1850, see Martha Vicinus, *The Industrial Muse: A Study of Nineteenth Century British Working-class Literature* (London, 1974), pp. 189-237.

54. See, for example, unsigned notice, *Edinburgh Magazine*, 4 (October, 1786), 284-288; Low, pp. 63-64. The following citations are also particular examples of general trends.

55. Henry Mackenzie, *Lounger*, 97 (9 December, 1786); *ibid.*, pp. 67-71.

56. John Logan, *English Review*, 9 (February, 1787), 81-93; *ibid.*, pp. 76-79.

precedence over the previous emphasis on the disadvantages of Burns's social status.⁵⁷ Various arguments were put forward against regarding Burns as a prodigy. His relative lack of education some now thought an advantage. Sir Egerton Brydges contended that Burns's genius was sublime because it had not been restrained 'by every artifice of emulation, and every advantage of precept and example'.⁵⁸ Jeffrey argued similarly that the well-educated poet 'is perpetually haunted and depressed by the ideal presence of those great masters and their exacting critics'.⁵⁹ It was this kind of consideration that led Byron to ask - 'What would [Burns] have been, if a patrician? We should have had more polish - less force'.⁶⁰ Carlyle also considered Burns fortunate to have escaped the anxiety of influence; it was because Burns had to rely almost totally on himself that he was so original.⁶¹ Whereas Burns had been hailed as a prodigy by his first reviewers because his poetry so closely approximated to what one critic called 'the fastidious rules of art',⁶² he was later praised for a native strength that made those rules irrelevant.

Very few of these arguments had not been anticipated in the eighteenth century. Carlyle's praise of Burns, for instance, echoed Addison's classifications of genius; attracting greatest praise are those who by the meer Strength of natural Parts, and without any Assistance of Art or Learning, have produced Works that were the Delight of their own Times and the Wonder of Posterity.⁶³

It was often asserted that the greatest genius was the least educated. Edward Young went so far as to claim that 'Many a Genius, probably, there has been, which could neither write, nor read'.⁶⁴ With respect to Burns,

57. Robert Heron, *A Memoir*; *ibid.*, pp. 117-127.

58. Egerton Brydges, *Censura Literaria* (1815); *ibid.*, p. 170.

59. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 13 (January, 1809), 249-276; *ibid.*, p. 179.

60. *Ibid.*, p. 257.

61. Thomas Carlyle, *Edinburgh Review*, 48, 96 (December, 1828); *ibid.*, pp. 351-393.

62. Unsigned notice, *Edinburgh Magazine*, 4 (October, 1786), 284-288; *ibid.*, p. 64.

63. *The Spectator* no. 160 (3 September, 1711); Bond, II, pp. 126-127.

64. Edward Young, *Conjectures on Original Composition*, facsimile reprint (Leeds, 1969), p. 35.

however, claims concerning the superiority of his genius were only gradually accepted. The reason is that in the eighteenth century theories relating to original genius were rarely extended to include the poor. Homer and Shakespeare were usually the examples chosen; the common practice was to compare the civilized with the primitive, not the educated with the poor. In fact, whenever the poor were mentioned in this connection, it was usually as an exception to the rule that originality was repressed by cultivation. Thus, according to William Duff -

Poverty is scarce more unfavourable to the display of true Poetic Genius than excessive Affluence is. The former crushes its early and aspiring efforts at once; the latter more slowly, but no less surely, enervates its powers, and dissolves them in Luxury and Pleasure.⁶⁵

Frances Reynolds argued similarly with respect to taste -

In the present state of society, taste seems to be equally excluded from the highest and from the lowest sphere of life. The one seems to be too much encumbered with artificial imaginary necessities; the other too much encumbered with the real and natural necessities of life, to attend to its cultivation.⁶⁶

Lord Kames was less reticent in denying taste to the poor -

Those who depend for food on bodily labour, are totally devoid of taste; of such a taste at least as can be of use in the fine arts.⁶⁷

Richard Jago, in his poem *Labour and Genius* (1768), presents labour and genius as simple opposites.⁶⁸

It is not surprising, then, that Joseph Spence, introducing Stephen Duck to the literary public in 1730, attempted, like the early reviewers of Burns, to approximate Duck as far as possible to the standards of polite culture while remaining emphatically aware of his inevitable inferiority. Jefferson Carter suggests that there was initially little relation between primitivist theories, according to which Homer, for example, was celebrated as a spontaneous bard of a primitive society, and the notoriety of poets such as Duck, an agricultural labourer who, it

65. William Duff, *An Essay on Original Genius* (London, 1767), p. 292.

66. Reynolds, p. 46.

67. Kames, II, pp. 493-494.

68. Richard Jago, *Labour and Genius; or, The Millstream and the Cascade* (London, 1768).

was thought, had managed to transcend his social limitations.⁶⁹ An engraving of Duck, which formed the frontispiece of the 1730 edition of his *Poems on Several Subjects*, represents him uncertainly poised between two cultures. In one hand he holds a copy of Milton's poetry and in the other a flail; he is better dressed than a fellow labourer who stares at him, astonished, over a gate; a crude stool and table, on which lies a liberal supply of writing materials, have been improbably set up in the middle of a barnyard full of farm animals. The major emphasis of the engraving is on Duck's achievement in raising himself through application to a status approaching that of a gentleman. Nevertheless, there is also perhaps a hint of genius in his gaze and stance; his eyes are lifted to heaven and his arms are held apart, as if welcoming divine inspiration. If Duck's fame was not as distinct from primitivist concepts as Dr Carter suggests, it is certainly true that connections were made with hesitation; James Osborn has pointed out that when Spence revised his account of Duck's life in 1736, he deleted all references to genius.⁷⁰ Spence compared Duck's self-education with the traditional liberal education -

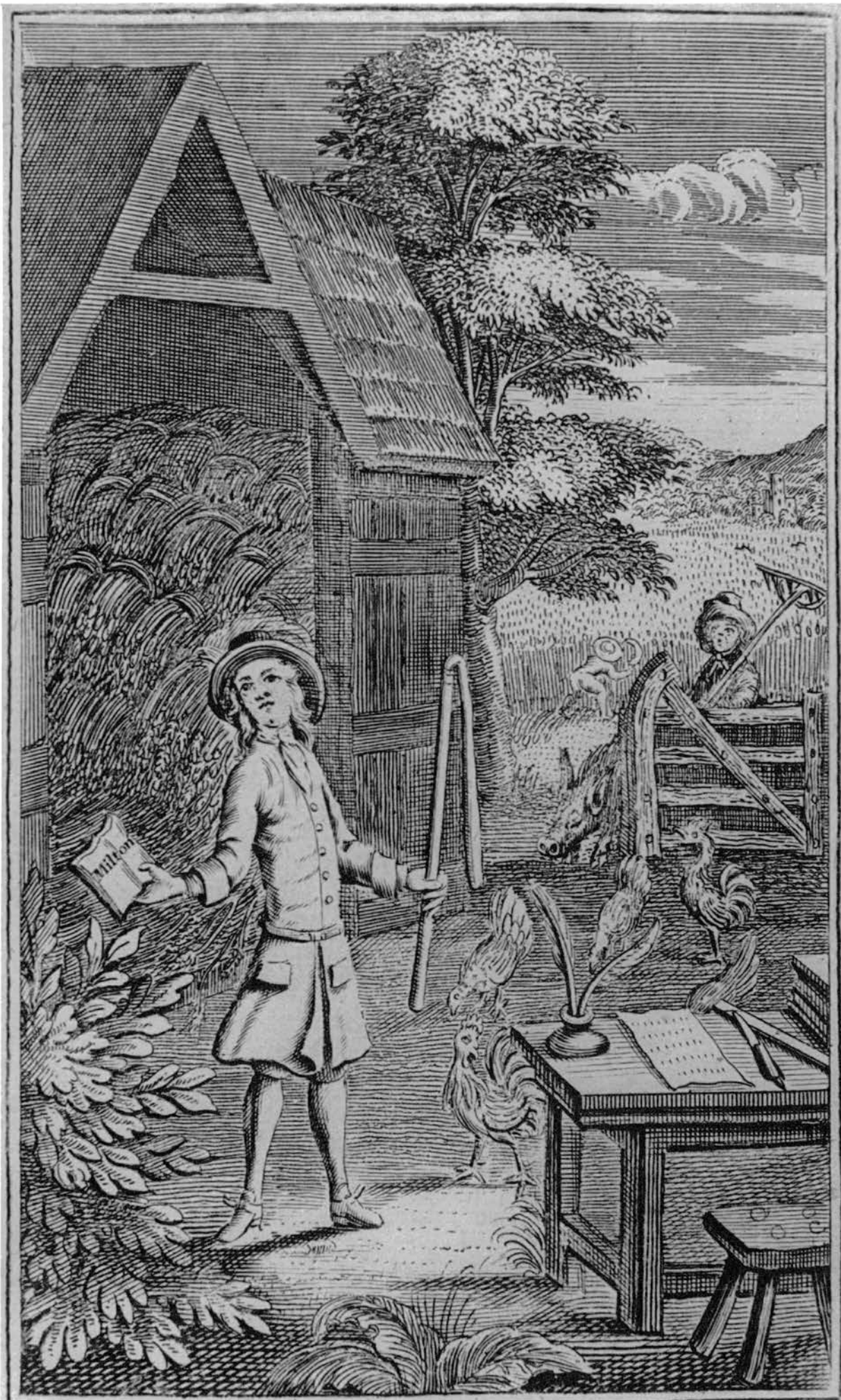
[H]e has got English just as we got Latin. He study'd Paradise Lost, as others study the Classics.⁷¹

At the same time he reported approvingly Duck's self-deprecating attitude to his poems -

Gentlemen, indeed, he said, might like them, because they were made by a poor Fellow in a Barn; but that he knew, as well as any body, that they were not really good in themselves.⁷²

Rayner Unwin quotes from one of Hannah More's letters to Mrs Montagu on the subject of Ann Yearsley, the milkwoman poet known as 'Lactilla' -

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69. Jefferson Carter, 'The Unlettered Muse: The uneducated poets and the concept of natural genius in eighteenth-century England', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Arizona, 1972, pp. 83-95.
70. James M. Osborn, 'Spence, Natural Genius and Pope', *Philological Quarterly*, 45, 1 (January, 1966), 123-144, p. 132.
71. Joseph Spence, 'An Account of the Author', *Poems on Several Occasions* (1736), facsimile reprint (Menston, 1973), p. xiv.
72. *Ibid.*, p. xx.



Stephen Duck.

'I should be sorry to see the wild vigour of her rustic muse polished into elegance' - and comments that 'this was a new approach to a proletarian poet'.⁷³ However, it must also be stressed that Hannah More's claims were not generally accepted by the reviewers, who continued to insist on the traditional standards of 'grace and elegance' -

The world expects that criticism should suspend its rigour, when the *Thresher* and the *Milk-woman* leave the humbler occupations of the farm-yard, to pay court to the Muses, and bring offerings to Apollo: it expects a more than ordinary share of candour for those deviations from grace and elegance, which necessarily arise from the habits of vulgar life, and the incumbrances of *low-thoughted Care*; and bids us excuse what we cannot applaud; though, where praise is due, it expects to have it dispensed in no common measure, and with no sparing hand.⁷⁴

Whether with the generosity of 'the world' or the rigour of the critics, however, the standards that were being universally applied to unlettered poets were those of lettered criticism.

Once Francis Hutcheson had related the perception of beauty to a moral sense which could only be weakened by education⁷⁵ and once Rousseau had argued that society was a corrupting influence, the extension of ideas of genius and taste to the poor was perhaps inevitable. In the second half of the eighteenth century, expanding on the liberality of Gray's *Elegy*, came the first indications of an alternative tradition which would encompass the belief that education might not be best defined as a knowledge of the classics, that genius and taste might extend beyond the higher classes of society and manifest themselves in different, not necessarily inferior, ways, and that poverty might actually foster that difference. The transition is dramatized by William Shenstone in his essay 'On the Test of Popular Opinion', in which a citizen, a courtier and an academic discuss whether the vulgar are capable of taste. The citizen suggests that 'the vulgar and illiterate generally approve the

73. Rayner Unwin, *The Rural Muse: Studies in the Peasant Poetry of England* (London, 1954), p. 78.

74. Unsigned review of Ann Yearsley, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1785), *Monthly Review*, 73 (September, 1785), 216-221, pp. 216-217.

75. See p. 33.

same productions with the connoisseurs'.⁷⁶ The courtier replies that they do so only by imitating their betters. The academic judiciously concludes by stating that the taste of the vulgar is crude but educable.

As we saw in the second chapter, the courtier was replaced by the citizen in the eighteenth century as the typical arbiter of taste and the citizen's attitude of *laissez-faire* began to be preferred to the courtier's hauteur and the academic's pontification. John Armstrong, in an essay 'Of Taste', first published in 1758, wrote -

An honest farmer, or shepherd, who is acquainted with no language but what is spoken in his own county, may have a much truer relish of the *English* writers than the most dogmatical pedant that ever erected himself into a commentator, and from his *Gothic* chair, with an ill-bred arrogance, dictated false criticism to the gaping multitude.⁷⁷

Joseph Swain, a Baptist minister, wrote a poem about a low-born poet -

Inglorious offspring of some lab'ring hind,
By birth a peasant, but a prince in mind...
('The Poet', 9 - 10)⁷⁸

There was a growing belief that taste was intuitive; since intuition was less educable than reason, it was less socially determined. Hugh Blair, in his published lecture on taste, argued that

nothing can be more clear, than that taste is not resolveable into any such operation of Reason. It is not merely through a discovery of the understanding or a deduction of argument, that the mind receives pleasure from a beautiful prospect or a fine poem. Such objects often strike us intuitively, and make a strong impression when we are unable to assign the reasons of our being pleased. They sometimes strike in the same manner the philosopher and the peasant; the boy and the man.⁷⁹

If taste could be a possible characteristic of the poor, then so could

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- 76. William Shenstone, *Essays on Men and Manners* (London, 1797), *Harrison's British Classics*, vol. 8, p. 4.
 - 77. John Armstrong, *Miscellanies* (1770), *Augustan Reprint Society* no. 30 (Los Angeles, 1951), p. 137.
 - 78. Joseph Swain, *A Collection of Poems on Several Occasions* (London, 1781), p. 1.
 - 79. Hugh Blair, *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres*, 2 vols (London, 1783), I, p. 16.

genius; the congruence of taste and genius was a commonplace.⁸⁰

According to George Chapman, 'it is reasonable to suppose, that geniuses of the first rate may sometimes be found among the lower, as well as the higher classes, of mankind'.⁸¹

Elizabeth Inchbald, in *Nature and Art* (1796), defines the contrary view as prejudice and asserts that

there exists in some, knowledge without the advantage of instruction; refinement of sentiment independent of elegant society; honourable pride of heart without dignity of blood; and genius destitute of art to render it conspicuous...⁸²

Once all this had been conceded there was no obstacle remaining to the adoption of the full Addisonian classification with respect to the poor. Hence it could be argued that poverty actually favoured the cultivation of genius as 'a pure specimen of innate partiality, strengthening in the face of opposition, and triumphing over every species of discouragement'.⁸³ Even so, this alternative tradition retained in some form the belief that genius was more naturally characteristic of the higher than the lower classes. Hugh Blair, for example, referred to 'that immense superiority which education and improvement give...to those who have studied the liberal arts, above the rude and untaught vulgar'.⁸⁴ Joseph Swain describes his poor poet as 'a prince in mind'; Carlyle would later refer to Burns as 'a King in exile'.⁸⁵ The most that was consciously granted was that genius 'has regard neither to rank, station, nor riches'.⁸⁶ If poverty had its peculiar advantages, they were negative in nature - the want of education, the want of polish. In other words, genius continued to be

80. See, for example, Bishop Warburton's commentary on Pope's *Essay on Criticism* - 'on examination we shall find, that *Genius* and *Taste* are but one and the same faculty' (Warburton, I, p. 139). See also Hugh Blair - 'Genius cannot be found without including Taste also' (Blair, I, p. 41).

81. Chapman, p. 65.

82. Elizabeth Inchbald, *Nature and Art*, 2 vols (London, 1796), I, p. 139.

83. 'Observations on Original Genius', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1 (July, 1817), 347-348, p. 347.

84. Blair, I, p. 19.

85. Thomas Carlyle, *Edinburgh Review*, 48, 96 (December, 1828); Low, p. 354.

86. Egerton Brydges, *Censura Literaria*; *ibid.*, p. 171.

defined in terms of the standards of polite culture. To have conceded more would have threatened what the reviewers regarded, we noted with respect to Crabbe, as the central position of the middle classes within a relatively homogeneous society.

Burns's own claims for attention owed nothing to this tradition. To Dr John Moore he wrote -

[A]s few, if any Writers, either moral or poetical, are intimately acquainted with the classes of Mankind among whom I have chiefly mingled, I may have seen men and manners in a different phasis, which may assist originality of thought.⁸⁷

While the reviewers were willing to grant Burns originality of expression, they never praised him for this kind of originality of perception because they never admitted to this degree of ignorance or this degree of difference. In the preface to the Kilmarnock edition of *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, published in 1786, Burns had played with the image of the peasant prodigy in order to expose the pretensions which had produced it -

The following trifles are not the production of the Poet, who, with all the advantages of learned art, and perhaps amid the elegancies and idlenesses of upper life, looks down for a rural theme, with an eye to Theocrites or Virgil... Unacquainted with the necessary requisites for commencing Poet by rule, he sings the sentiments and manners, he felt and saw in himself and his rustic compeers around him, in his and their native language.⁸⁸

Posing as a naive genius, Burns masks with apology his evident belief that his qualifications for poetry are superior to those whose experience is directly contrary to their subject-matter and who borrow their themes from classical models. Their attitude to rural life, he implies, is one of condescension, 'looking down' with divided attention. Stressing an allegiance with 'his rustic compeers', attributing to them 'sentiments and manners', pairing elegance with idleness, Burns is quietly provocative.

I am hesitant to stress this interpretation of the preface since many critics have read it simply as a calculated appeal to the educated public. David Daiches, for instance, thinks that 'Burns deliberately exaggerated his lack of education and played up to the sentimental notion

87. Letter to John Moore (January, 1787); Ferguson, I, p. 70.

88. Kinsley, III, p. 971.

of the "natural man".⁸⁹ Robert Dewar similarly suggests that Burns was anxious to avoid being taken for a well-read writer.⁹⁰ Moreover, this alternative interpretation is supported by contemporary evidence.

Dr Robert Anderson wrote to James Currie on 28 September, 1799 -

It was, I know, part of the machinery, as he called it, of his poetical character to pass for an illiterate ploughman who wrote from pure inspiration. When I pointed out some evident traces of poetical imitation in his verses, privately, he readily acknowledged his obligations, and even admitted the advantages he enjoyed in poetical composition from the *copia verborum*, the command of phraseology, which the knowledge and use of the English and Scottish dialects afforded him; but in company he did not suffer his pretension to pure inspiration to be challenged, and it was seldom done where it might be supposed to affect the success of the subscription for his *Poems*.⁹¹

Nevertheless, in the preface Burns disclaims knowledge only of the classical authors and does not attempt to disguise his acquaintance with Ramsay, Fergusson and Shenstone; many of the poems have epigraphs and quotations from English poetry. If, as Dr Anderson alleges, Burns did not allow his reputation for illiteracy to be challenged, neither did he vigorously encourage it. The image of Burns conveyed by his poetry is less the uneducated peasant participating in polite culture by means of inspiration than the articulate representative of an alternative culture. At the same time, blurring this and to some extent accounting for the differing interpretations, the poetry is thematically disjointed, its tone ranging inconsistently from defiance through irony and humour to sentimental appeal.

'The Twa Dogs' is an example of the way in which a potentially offensive poem is muted by a difficult tone. Burns draws the conventional parallel between the imaginary suffering of the wealthy and the real hardship of the poor. The qualities he admires are identical to those by which Crabbe and Cowper define the virtuous poor - industry, contentment, familial care and duty. Burns employs the traditional poetic methods of lessening social tension by attempting to close the gap between the subject-matter of the poem and its reader, who could be relied upon to sympathize with the poor against the dissolute rich and to admire the

89. David Daiches, *Robert Burns and his World* (London, 1971), p. 52.

90. R. Dewar, 'Robert Burns', in *Essays on the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 1945), pp. 190-211, p. 191. See also A.M. Kinghorn, 'The Literary and Historical Origins of the Burns Myth', *Dalhousie Review*, 39 (1959), 76-85.

91. Kinsley, III, pp. 1537-1538.

virtues described. However, Burns draws no distinction between approved qualities and what he calls 'social Mirth' (127) - drinking, talking politics, 'caressan' (17) - precisely the activities that conventionally characterized the idle poor. The difference between 'social Mirth' and the 'deep debauches' of the gentry (216) refers not to an ideal of self-restraint but to a sense of community, of fellow-feeling, evoked by the phrase 'common recreation' (126). It is typical of Burns that the poem should support apparently contradictory themes - that the poor and rich live similar lives of enjoyment and suffering and that they are so different as to belong to virtually opposed cultures. The only point of contact between the two groups is the despised 'factor' and the only relationship prefigured is one of commercial exploitation. At the same time Burns implies that pity is an inappropriate response to the humiliation of the poor. The high-born Ceasar exclaims -

I see how folk live that hae riches,
But surely poor-folk maun be *wretches*!
(101-102)

But Luath, the 'ploughman's collie' (23), replies - 'They're no sae wretched's ane wad think' (103) - and introduces the description of the common pastimes of the poor. In other words, the world of the poor is not simply a more humble version of the gentry's but is distinct with its own customs and centres of interest. The poor fulminate against the church and the government and gossip about Londoners with amused wonder at an alien and slightly silly way of life - they 'ferlie at the folk in LON'ON' (122) ('ferlie' means 'to marvel' but it is also a term of contempt).

To conclude our reading here would be to present the poem as more straightforward than it actually is, for the opening description of the two dogs provides a context which resonates with contrasts and parallels. The companionship of the dogs, for example, measures by contrast the hostility of the two social groups. At the same time their relationship dramatizes the fellow-feeling of the poor; they sit down to discuss 'the lords o' the creation' (46) just as 'the bodies' (116) discuss politics over their ale. The first image of a cotter is reminiscent of the description of the dogs - 'A *Cotter* howckan in a sheugh' (72). The dialogue form of the poem works to expose the dogs' mutual ignorance, emphasizing the separation of the two social groups rather than expressing two contrasting viewpoints. Ceasar represents not the gentry so much as

the average reader, uninformed but curious and concerned, more closely associated with the gentry than with the poor but nevertheless distinct from both.

Burns's sympathies are never in doubt; he appears in the poem as Luath's owner. Like Luath, Burns is the representative of the poor and asks from the reader the kind of response that Ceasar freely gives in spite of his social remoteness. The form of this appeal is as unorthodox as that of 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' is conventional. Burns's real achievement is to establish the characters' dogginess ('Whyles scour'd awa in lang excursion', 41) and at the same time convey real voices, thus enlivening the descriptions of the poor with a convincing *camaraderie* which expects, but does not plead for, approval -

Hech man! dear sirs! is that the gate,
They waste sae mony a braw estate!
Are we sae foughten an' harass'd
For gear to gang that gate at last!
(171-174)

This passage powerfully realizes a sense of exasperation quickening into anger, the stress falling dismissively on 'gear', the hard consonants spat out at the end. Even the juxtaposition of exclamations, the outright 'Hech man!' with the satirically effete but violent 'dear sirs!', is social comment; an assertion of equality between dog and dog, based on shared 'manhood', is coupled with a sneering reference to a form of address which insists on a more deferential relationship determined by status. Nevertheless, the fact that this voice has a dog's body gives it an air of arch effrontery which, while apparently reinforcing the poem's sympathy with the lower classes, actually undercuts the seriousness of the commentary. The poem is, after all, only 'a lang digression' (45) from the more genial business of hunting mice and moles; its occasional bitterness is merely shrugged off at the end -

up they gat, an' shook their lugs,
Rejoic'd they were na *men* but *dogs*...
(235-236)

The humour of 'The Twa Dogs' diffuses the social criticism. It is not therefore perhaps surprising that the poem's early readers responded only to its conventional themes without apparently noticing the transformations which Burns's animus had effected. Burns introduces the traditional imagery of contentment not, it seems to me, as an ideal for

the poor to imitate but in order to berate the gentry for so often destroying the degree of well-being that the poor manage to retain. The contentment of the poor in the poem does not extend to their position in the social hierarchy -

They'll talk o' *patronage* an' *priests*,
Wi' kindling fury i' their breasts...
(119-120)

Nor does it comprise reconciliation to labour. Burns never portrays agricultural labour as anything but demeaning and oppressive; in a letter to Mrs Dunlop he described it as 'breaking of clods & picking up grubs'.⁹² In fact, the contentment described in 'The Twa Dogs' is equivalent to 'social Mirth' and has little to do with the conventional virtues. Nevertheless, James Currie thought that Burns's plan had been 'to inculcate a lesson of contentment on the lower classes of society, by shewing that their superiors are neither much better nor happier than themselves'.⁹³ And according to Allan Cunningham, the poem proved 'that happiness is not unequally diffused'.⁹⁴

Burns's readers, however, generally tended to be more comfortable with the pathos of poems such as 'The Cotter's Saturday Night' than with the humour of poems like 'The Twa Dogs' which, according to Henry Mackenzie, had a reputation for 'libertinism and irreligion'.⁹⁵ 'The Holy Fair' similarly proposes gregarious communality as a moral standard by which the religion of the preachers is found wanting. Warnings of sin and retribution are uttered in the midst of drunkenness and love-making. The carefree nature of the gathering implicitly questions the thundered terrors of the sermons; hell becomes a neighbour's snores (194-198). Compared with the Fun of the crowd the religious orthodoxy is Superstition and Hypocrisy. Burns is less concerned to establish the falsity of the sermons, however, than to emphasize their unintelligible foreignness - one preacher has an 'English style' (129), his speech is 'barren' (127); another offends against common sense, personified as a fleeing member of

92. Letter to Mrs Dunlop (7 December, 1788); Ferguson, I, p. 277.

93. James Currie, 'Criticism on the writings of Burns'; Low, p. 134.

94. *The Works of Robert Burns*, edited by Allan Cunningham (1834); *ibid.*, p. 413.

95. Henry Mackenzie, *Lounger*, 97 (9 December, 1786); *ibid.*, p. 70.

the crowd (140-144). The religion of the preachers is embodied by the 'Chosen swatch, / Wi' screw'd-up, grace-proud faces' (86-87). Their individuality is lost within the conformity of the Elect. Vain of their distinction, they nevertheless disapprove of difference in others. Burns's debunking description, 'swatch', implies that their election has less than divine sanction. The word recalls an earlier group, 'a batch o' *Wabster lads*' (79), whose retained plurality indicates that their company represents the shared interests of youth and locality rather than the repressive anonymity of adherence to principle. The most important conversions that occur at the meeting are, in parody of the intended progression, from stone to flesh, that is, from the sterile fixity of the 'Chosen swatch' to the amorous vitality of the '*Wabster lads*' -

How monie hearts this day converts,
O' Sinners and o' Lasses!
Their hearts o' stane, gin night are gane
As soft as ony flesh is.

(235-238)

Dr Hugh Blair objected to the poem's irreverence, criticizing in particular the lines

[Moodie] speels the holy door,
Wi' tidings o' s-lv-t-n...
(102-103)⁹⁶

Burns in response altered 's-lv-t-n' to 'd-mn-t-n' in the Edinburgh edition. It has been suggested that this is a great improvement.⁹⁷ On the contrary, it seems to me to be false to the poem. The audience are simply not conscious of the need for salvation and hence Moodie's preaching is to them irrelevant nonsense; they look forward not to heaven but to the assignations with which the poem and the meeting conclude. Burns's emendation tames the poem by narrowing its focus; the satire is no longer directed in this passage at a repressive religion which seeks to regiment the heterogeneous communality of the crowd but at a ranting clergyman. Yet the true religious values inhere not in the barren religion of the sermons but in the fecund geniality of the crowd -

96. Ibid., p. 81.

97. Franklyn B. Snyder, *The Life of Robert Burns* (New York, 1932), p. 204.

Wi' *faith* an' *hope*, an' *love* an' *drink*,
 They're a' in famous tune
 For crack that day.

(232-234)

To 'charity', with its contemporary implications of superiority, Burns preferred 'love', a word that is more democratic and perhaps more faithful to the original. In any case, it is a word that has less in common with vainglory than with the companionability of drinking.

At least one reader understood and was disturbed by the extent of Burns's distrust of principle -

[I]s there then nothing besides a strange mixture of superstition, traffic, and amusement, in the scene which such an annual celebration in a rural parish of Scotland presents?⁹⁸

It is clearly the drama rather than the moral quality of human relationships that fascinated Burns. Those who seek to regulate their behaviour by an immutable morality act according to a view of humankind which, he thought, could be easily exposed -

There's some are fou o' *love divine*;
 There's some are fou o' brandy...

(239-240)

Spiritual ecstasy is as superficial and transient as the effects of brandy. In 'The Jolly Beggars', a poem excluded from the Edinburgh edition because of Blair's disapproval and finally published in 1799 as a chapbook by Thomas Stewart, the promiscuity of the women and the rough bullying of the men are presented as humanity without its self-conscious pretensions -

Life is all a VARIORUM,
 We regard not how it goes;
 Let them cant about DECORUM,
 Who have character to lose.

(270-273)

Burns is nevertheless not denying the existence of qualities beyond an anarchic hedonism. Transcending this, in 'The Jolly Beggars', is the honest courage and selfless dedication of the soldier, the indignant loyalty of the woman to her executed Highlandman. What matters to the soldier is not the justice of his wars but the fact that someone relies on him; what concerns the woman is not the legality of her lover's death but the fact that he was killed. If their courage and anger are

98. J.G. Lockhart, *Life of Robert Burns* (Edinburgh, 1828), p. 100.

occasional only and inspired partly by whisky, this does not make Burns's irony satirical. The precise extent of Burns's irony in the poem, which has been the major concern of recent criticism, becomes significant, it seems to me, only if the poem is read primarily as a social critique. The fact that the poem has been interpreted as both a satire, in which 'the victims of [Burns's] irony...are not his moral readers, but the beggars themselves',⁹⁹ and as a portrayal of heroism in the face of oppression¹⁰⁰ has led Karl Miller to argue that the poem is flawed by a compromising ambivalence which

allows healthy and wealthy readers to play at outlaws, while
consoling them with the thought that love and liberty must be
paid for in rags and sores and stumps.¹⁰¹

However, just as the poem's pervasive irony prevents the inference of any certain social attitude, so it also precludes any final judgment by the reader and makes the sense of play which Miller identifies potentially disconcerting rather than consoling. Although Miller, as we shall see, accurately describes the way in which the poem was, in fact, read by early reviewers and critics, it is not, I think, a legitimate reading 'allowed' by the poem and Burns cannot be fairly criticized for the tendentiousness of his readers. What the poem invites us to accept is that questions of honour and love are, when men and women come together, tested on the pulse; law and morality are, finally, abstractions, inventions for the sake of social convenience -

COURTS for Cowards were erected,
CHURCHES built to please the Priest.
(280-281)

Even these statements of principle, however, are presented with a spirit of bravado that implies its own criticism.

David Craig has suggested that Scots verse is reductive in form and idiom -

99. James Kinsley, 'Burns and the Peasantry, 1785', *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 60 (1974), 135-153, p. 150.

100. Crawford, pp. 201-210.

101. Robert Burns, *Poems*, selected by Karl Miller (London, 1981), p. 10.

A result of the taste for forms based on social festivities is to limit the kind of life, and the attitude to it, that can be expressed. Conviviality, the drink, music, and good-fellowship of the pub, the fun and knock-about of the public holiday - such things form the situation and state of mind from which much of the vernacular poetry at least starts. One cannot but feel that it is at the expense of the more inward feelings and settled and abiding concerns of the people.¹⁰²

This is essentially the criticism that Carlyle levelled at Burns, referring to the 'changeeful, too fugitive expressiveness of his diction' and describing him as a 'Volksdichter, more notable for shrewd sense, passionate attachment, & certain rustic humour than any higher qualities'.¹⁰³ It is true that Burns's poems tend to be relatively unstructured; they casually open and close with little development. As with 'The Twa Dogs', they often seem a digression within a larger context of activity. It is as if the contingencies of the situation dictate the thoughts and emotions presented so as to emphasize their dramatic, fleeting, open-ended quality. Yet the effect of this is not, I think, to reduce the poetry to a succession of shallow sensations. At his best Burns dramatizes living, changing individuals who give voice to their feelings idiomatically, tangentially, casually, incoherently, as real people do. 'Conviviality' implies the ability to live together; it is, in Burns's poetry, prior to but does not exclude 'higher qualities'. At best Burns's humour is neither evasive, as in 'The Twa Dogs', nor cynical. In 'The Holy Fair' and 'The Jolly Beggars', for example, it is sceptical, questioning not the existence of 'higher qualities' but their permanence and universality and, above all, resisting their elevation to fixed standards of judgment.

Craig underestimates the histrionic and contingent quality of much of Scots verse, Carlyle its deliberation. In a poem, first published anonymously as a chapbook in 1792, by one of Burns's better imitators, Alexander Wilson, journeyman weaver, pedlar and well-known ornithologist, the juxtaposition of English and Scots introduces an element of comic

102. David Craig, *Scottish Literature and the Scottish People 1680-1830* (London, 1961), p. 95.

103. Letter to Goethe (23 October, 1830), in *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, edited by C.R. Sanders and K.J. Fielding (Durham, North Carolina, 1970-), V (1976), p. 179.

hyperbole which prevents the reader from responding to the language at face value -

Watty, wha 'midst this oration,
 Ey'd her whiles, but durstna speak,
 Sat like patient Resignation,
 Trem'ling by the ingle cheek.
 ('Watty and Meg; or, The Wife Reformed', 105-108)¹⁰⁴

The 'oration' referred to is, in fact, a torrent of abuse from Watty's wife, Meg, who has caught him wasting time and money in the alehouse. The word acts as a euphemism, qualifying the seriousness of Watty's offence by making Meg seem ridiculously coarse and uncontrolled. At the same time Watty's pose is so obviously calculated to win Meg's sympathy while disguising his own genuine fear that we are forced to remain disinterested. Although the poem is presented from Watty's point of view, we recognize the poet's manipulation of Watty as well as Watty's manipulation of Meg. The comic use of language preserves a distance between the poem and the reader which in turn intimates other kinds of incongruity. Because of the peculiar status of English in Scotland its use in the context of Scots verse conveys a sense of putting on airs. Watty adopts a pose which belongs to a higher social class and which only serves to emphasize his own rusticity. The sense of incongruity, however, also reflects on the solitary abstraction itself, implying that 'resignation' is a state of behaviour unnaturally static, an assumed rather than real state. In another poem, 'The Pack', Wilson skilfully indicates social pretension by the use of the one obtrusively English word, 'presumes' -

'Ye're come frae Glasco', lad, I true;
 (The pert guidwife presumes)
 (54-55)

Burns had a similar sensitivity to the ways in which language defines character and social status. In 'Tam o'Shanter', for instance, the description of Kate's abuse as 'lengthen'd sage advices' (35) has a comic and distancing effect similar to that of the equivalent passage in Wilson's poem. It implies that moral judgments of that kind are

104. *The Poems and Literary Prose of Alexander Wilson*, edited by A.B. Groshart, 2 vols (Paisley, 1876), I, p. 7. All quotations from Wilson's poetry are from this edition.

inappropriate, at least to the characters and plot of this poem. Burns is here at once catering for his more cultivated readers ('Ah, gentle dames', 33) and placing them; his real attention is elsewhere - 'But to our tale' (37). Wordsworth therefore misread the poem completely when he imputed to Burns a moral intention -

The poet, penetrating the unsightly and disgusting surface of things, has unveiled with exquisite skill the finer ties of imagination and feeling, that often bind these beings to practices productive of so much unhappiness to themselves, and to those whom it is their duty to cherish; - and, as far as he puts the reader in possession of this intelligent sympathy, he qualifies him for exercising a salutary influence over the minds of those who are thus deplorably enslaved.¹⁰⁵

Thoughts of Tam's impatiently waiting wife are, in fact, lost in the speed and excitement of the narrative. Our disapproval, already parodied by Burns's own mock-rebuke ('O Tam!', 17), is either forgotten or overcome; like Tam, we become 'enslaved' by circumstance - 'Nae man can tether time or tide' (67). With an impudence characteristic of Burns which Wordsworth in his *Letter to a Friend of Robert Burns* chose to ignore, Tam's victory over the witches in the midnight storm is also shown to be a victory over the 'sulky sullen' morality of his wife who sits

Gathering her brows like gathering storm,
Nursing her wrath to keep it warm.

(11-12)

Tam weathers both storms. Because of this the poem's cautionary conclusion, comically bathetic in its evasive inadequacy ('wha this tale o' truth shall read', 219), suggests the inappropriateness of an unequivocal moral response to the drama of Tam's story.

Burns's comedy often works through a balancing of understatement and hyperbole, disturbing our expectations by exceeding or falling short of them. When the manner seems disproportionate to the matter of the poetry, our belief in the poet's commitment to his argument is undermined. His rhetoric becomes too obviously manipulative; we sense that his eye is on us instead of his subject. In comic poems a space is thereby opened between the poem's speaking voice and our imagined idea of the poet's real personality so that the poem is accompanied by an implicit irony. When

105. Owen and Smyser, III, p. 125. In the *Lyrical Ballads*, I shall argue in the following chapter, there is evidence of a less solemn reading of the poem.

the intention is unequivocally serious, however, as in 'The Cotter's Saturday Night', the poetry then seems artificial and melodramatic; we are unable to sustain a belief in the poet's sincerity. On the one hand, the poet's own limitations are embarrassingly on display. On the other, it is the reader's assumptions that are being provocatively tested; at the same time, by admitting his own fallibility (in 'Tam o'Shanter' by the use of the inclusive 'we' which links the poet with Tam), the poet implicitly asks our pardon and from our acquiescence arises the comedy. If the poet appears less fallible than the reader, our consent will be less forthcoming and the comedy will tend to satire. If more fallible, it becomes farce and our assumptions are left intact. For example, this mode of provocative exaggeration reappears in the more or less fictionalized character of Hogg in *Noctes Ambrosianae* where it becomes merely the manner of the *naif* in the company of his betters. According to Carlyle, the real James Hogg played a similar role -

Appears in the mingled character of zany and raree show... The man is a very curious *specimen*. Alas! he is a *man*; yet how few will so much as treat him like a *specimen*, and not like a mere wooden *Punch* or *Judy*!¹⁰⁶

Jeffrey disapproved of the exaggerated manner of much of Burns's serious poetry, describing it as

a mere accumulation of hyperbolical expressions, which incumber the diction instead of exalting it, and show the determination to be impressive, without the power of executing it.¹⁰⁷

The more conscious Burns was of a refined audience, the more wooden he became. Consequently in his letters his self-dramatization was less arch and more pleading -

Poverty! Thou half-sister of Death, thou cousin-german of Hell, where shall I find force of execration equal to thy demerits!... By thee, the Man of Sentiment whose heart glows with Independence & melts with sensibility, inly pines under the neglect, or writhes in bitterness of soul under the contumely, of arrogant, unfeeling Wealth. - By thee the Man of Genius whose ill-starred ambition plants him at the tables of the Fashionable & Polite, must see in suffering silence his remark neglected & his person despised,

106. J.A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle, 1795-1835*, 2 vols (London, 1882), II, p. 234.

107. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 13 (January, 1809), 249-276; Low, p. 184.

while shallow Greatness in his idiot attempts at wit shall meet with countenance & applause. -

... Owing to thee, the Man of unfortunate dispositions & neglected education, is condemned as a fool for his dissipation; despised & shunned as a needy wretch, when his follies as usual have brought him to want; & when his unprincipled necessities drive him to dishonest practices, he is abhorred as a miscreant, & perishes by the justice of his country. - But far otherwise is the lot of the man of Family & Fortune. - His early extravagance & folly, are fire & spirit; his consequent wants, are the embarrassments of an Honest Fellow...¹⁰⁸

Burns was uncertain of his social position. He felt frustrated by a society which denied him opportunities to which others became entitled by birth. He offered for the approval of the gentry poems which sometimes insulted them and sometimes confirmed their condescension. His Muse was alternately, as in 'The Vision', a 'tight, outlandish Hizzie, braw' (41) and 'an elder Sister' (137).

Middle-class reviewers, who themselves had to assert their claims to attention, were more sympathetic to Burns's insistence on being seen as a man rather than a peasant than to his belief in the moral differences of an alternative rural culture. When, for instance, Lockhart discusses 'The Jolly Beggars', he points shrewdly to a distinction between Burns and Crabbe -

We would have thrown a few shillings to Mr. Crabbe's Mendicants, but we are more than half inclined to sit down and drink them ourselves with the 'orra duds' of those of Burns.¹⁰⁹

He fails, however, to acknowledge that, as far as a gentleman is concerned, condescension and company might be equally unwelcome to the 'randie, gangrel bodies' of 'Poosie-Nansie's' (8-9) - 'A fig for those by LAW protected' (178). The belief in 'natural man' whose universal nature is obscured by adventitious distinctions of status and wealth, a belief made popular by Rousseau, coincided, to some extent, with the emphasis of moral philosophers on a common human nature.¹¹⁰ Part of the 'lesson of contentment' which James Currie read in 'The Twa Dogs', for example, was

108. Letter to Peter Hill (17 January, 1791); Ferguson, II, pp. 51-52.

109. J.G. Lockhart, *Peter's Letters to his Kinsfolk* (1819); Low, p. 308.

110. On 'uniformitarianism', see A.O. Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), pp. 288-293.

that 'human nature is essentially the same in the high and the low'.¹¹¹ Indeed, Luath and Ceasar are identical in speech and manner; all that separates them are an accident of birth and Ceasar's brass collar. However, this is equally open to the interpretation that social distinctions are unjustifiable,¹¹² an interpretation which, it seems to me, the poem as a whole favours. Belief in the artificiality of social distinctions seems to have been stronger in the Scots than in the English literary tradition. Perhaps the central theme of *The Gentle Shepherd* is that the 'Poor and Rich but differ in the Name' (IV, ii, 68), a formulation of the argument significantly different from Currie's. Currie characterizes the social distinctions as a natural division ('the high', 'the low'), while attempting to prevent possible antagonism by stressing a common humanity; Ramsay, on the other hand, suggests that social distinctions are merely adventitious classifications.

Moral sense theory might be thought to have had some influence on this dichotomy, for, popularly interpreted, it meant that virtue depended for its definition not on rational principles or social orthodoxies but on a natural law recognized by the individual heart, as the following passage from *Noctes Ambrosianae* makes clear -

[W]hate'er's truly good, and emanates brichtly frae the shrine o' natur, will strike wi' a sudden charm on the heart o' him that is made acquainted wi't frae a distance, as if it were a revelation o' the same law pervadin a' spheres o' being alike...¹¹³

This moral subjectivity was sometimes thought to place an emphasis on benevolence which endangered prudence, as Marilyn Butler has shown.¹¹⁴ Nevertheless, as Butler also indicates, this criticism was made by conservatives and radicals alike; the subjectivity of moral sense theory

111. James Currie, 'Criticism on the writings of Burns'; Low, p. 135n.

112. Rousseau's writings were increasingly interpreted in this way in the 1790s when he was generally associated with Jacobinism. The vicissitudes of Rousseau's reputation in England are investigated in Edward Duffy, *Rousseau in England: The Context for Shelley's Critique of the Enlightenment* (Berkeley, 1979).

113. *Noctes Ambrosianae* no. 59, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 30, 187 (November, 1831), 802-846, p. 810.

114. Butler, pp. 7-42, 95-96.

was not sufficiently threatening to the idea of an ordered social consensus to prevent the commendation of the Tory *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*. As the above passage suggests, the moral sense was often justified by an appeal to the natural law traditionally held to sanction the social order. Burns, however, by advocating in his best poems a relativity which was both moral and social and so challenging the notion of hierarchically arranged 'spheres o' being', emphasized the individualist aspect of the theory to an extent that was more permanently unacceptable to the body of reviewers. The latter tended to assert a view of society at once sufficiently hierarchical to ensure their own centrality and sufficiently homogeneous to be regulated by a universal code of behaviour defined by Jeffrey as 'prudence, decency and regularity'.¹¹⁵ In his first commonplace book Burns wrote that

no man can say in what degree any person besides himself can be, with strict justice, called wicked. Let any of the strictest character for regularity of conduct among us examine impartially how many of his virtues are owing to constitution and education; how many vices he has never been guilty of, not from any care or vigilance, but from want of opportunity, or some accidental circumstance intervening...¹¹⁶

These sentiments, which inform poems such as 'The Jolly Beggars',¹¹⁷ represent a challenge to Jeffrey's triad. It was a challenge met in part by a strict division of Burns's poetry into pathos, which required serious attention, and comedy, which, as Scott wrote of 'The Jolly Beggars', deserved 'indulgence for a few light strokes of broad humour'.¹¹⁸ As the

115. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 13 (January, 1809), 249-276; Low, p. 182.

116. Robert Burns, *First Commonplace Book 1783-1785*, edited by Raymond L. Brown (Wakefield, 1969), p. 9.

117. Compare the following passage from the first commonplace book -
 I have often coveted the acquaintance of that part of mankind commonly known by the ordinary phrase of blackguards, sometimes farther than was consistent with the safety of my character...
 I have yet found among them, in not a few instances, some of the noblest virtues, magnanimity, generosity, disinterested friendship, and even modesty, in the highest degree.

(Ibid., pp. 9-10)

118. Walter Scott, *Quarterly Review*, 1 (February, 1809), 19-36; Low, p. 198.

popularity of 'The Jolly Beggars' indicates, standards of decorum were relaxed for comic poems. An illustration of 'The Jolly Beggars', a woodcut by Bewick from a design by Thurston,¹¹⁹ shows the result. Little attempt has been made to soften the scene or caricature the figures. Squalor is represented with a surprising lack of concern, from the ragged clothing, the figures on the floor, the open embraces, to the rats in the rafters. The central position is given to a man and woman robustly singing in spite of their particularly destitute appearance. The engraving almost ostentatiously avoids sentimental appeal; all of the figures are facing away from us.

Nevertheless, there were also those who refused to accept a division of standards. In his review of Cromek's *Reliques of Robert Burns* (1808), the first collection of Burns's writings to include 'The Jolly Beggars', Jeffrey referred to Burns's belief 'in the dispensing power of genius and social feeling, in all matters of morality and common sense' and commented - 'This is the very slang of the worst German plays, and the lowest of our town-made novels'.¹²⁰ The reputation of German drama to which Jeffrey here refers may be sampled by a quotation from Thomas Mathias, the author of the popular poem, *The Pursuits of Literature* (1794-1797) -

The modern productions of the German stage...have one general tendency to Jacobinism... They are too often the licensed vehicles of immorality and licentiousness... [T]he German Doctors of the sock and buskin are now making no indirect attacks on the very fundamentals of society and established government, subordination, and religious principle; the vaunt-couriers of French anarchy, national plunder, and general misery.¹²¹

The question of morality tended to preoccupy commentators on Burns. In fact, more interest and controversy were aroused by his life than by his poetry. His defenders were often felt to be setting up genius against morality -

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119. *The Poetical Works of Robert Burns*, 2 vols (Alnwick, [1808?]), II, frontispiece.
120. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 13 (January, 1809), 249-276; Low, pp. 182-183.
121. Thomas Mathias, *The Shade of Alexander Pope on the Banks of the Thames* (London, 1799), pp. 66-67n.



See the Smoking Bowl before us,
Mark our Jovial Ragged Ring!

Jolly Beggars.

[T]hey were willing to sacrifice morality, rather than that the idol set up before their imagination should be degraded; and did far worse injury, and offered far worse insult, to Virtue and Religion, by thus slurring over the offences of Burns against both, than ever was done by those offences themselves.¹²²

Lockhart indeed thought that Crabbe's 'Edward Shore' was based on Burns.¹²³

Burns was therefore vaguely associated with what had been regarded as a general attack on established values in the name of Jacobinism and he inevitably suffered from the political reaction of the early nineteenth century. Jeffrey's comparison with German drama cannot, however, be pressed. Burns was knowingly brash rather than deliberately innovatory in the manner that Hazlitt, for instance, writing on German drama, describes -

The German tragedy...aims at effect...and it does this by going all the lengths not only of instinctive feeling, but of speculative opinion, and startling the hearer by overturning all the established maxims of society, and setting at nought all the received rules of composition.¹²⁴

Burns's radicalism has been exaggerated. W.J. Murray, for example, argues that Burns

held firmly and consistently to certain social and political ideals, and that these were, broadly speaking, the ideals of the French Revolution, not just the 'liberal' Revolution of 1789, but the more democratic Revolution of 1793.¹²⁵

Burns's politics, however, extended from Jacobinism to Jacobitism; both were opposed to English authority and both appealed to his image of himself as a social rebel. For the same reason he adopted Milton's Satan as a literary hero. As in his poetry, these professions of belief were the temporary poses of a shifting personality. An essential aspect of Burns's rebelliousness was his opposition to the very concept of political ideals as immutable teleological goals. As we have seen, when Burns 'startled'

122. *Noctes Ambrosianae* no. 42, *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 25, 151 (April, 1829), 525-548, p. 537.

123. *Life of Robert Burns*, p. 373n.

124. Howe, VI (1931), p. 360.

125. W.J. Murray, 'Poetry and Politics: Burns and Revolution', in *Studies in the Eighteenth Century* IV, edited by R.F. Brissenden and J.C. Eade (Canberra, 1979), 57-82, p. 59.

the reader, the reader was to some extent expected to be aware of a game -

I have bought a pocket Milton, which I carry perpetually about with me, in order to study the sentiments - the dauntless magnanimity; the intrepid unyielding independance; the desperate daring, and noble defiance of hardship, in that great personage, Satan...[T]houghtless follies and harebrained whims, like so many Ignis fatui, eternally diverging from the right line of sober discretion, sparkle with step-bewitching blaze in the idly-gazing eyes of the poor heedless Bard, till, pop, 'he falls like Lucifer, never to hope again'.¹²⁶

Burns's declarations of allegiance are always disconcertingly liable to go 'pop'. At the same time it would be unjustifiable to conclude that Burns's sense of humour reveals his social dissatisfaction to be nugatory. The effect of poems such as 'The Holy Fair', 'Tam o'Shanter' and 'The Jolly Beggars', if the reader consents to them, is to render the reader's commitment to the principles questioned less earnest. Burns was concerned not to replace one set of principles with another but to ensure that whatever beliefs were invoked by those in authority would be made to respect the fact of human vitality and individuality.

Keats had perhaps the finest and most inward sympathy for Burns's poetry. After visiting Burns's grave during his tour of Scotland in 1818, he wrote to his brother Tom of 'the horrible dominion of the Scotch Kirk', which produced 'regular Phalanges of savers and gainers' -

I have not sufficient reasoning faculty to settle the doctrine of thrift - as it is consistent with the dignity of human Society - with the happiness of Cottagers - All I can do is by plump contrasts - Were the fingers made to squeeze a guinea or a white hand? Were the Lips made to hold a pen or a kiss? And yet in Cities Man is shut out from his fellows if he is poor, the Cottager must be dirty and very wretched if she be not thrifty - The present state of society demands this and this convinces me that the world is very young and in a very ignorant state - We live in a barbarous age.¹²⁷

Apart from equating, like Burns, the dignity of the poor with their happiness and contrasting their sense of community with the divisive effects of commercial and religious orthodoxy, Keats here demonstrates the same scepticism with respect to the doctrinaire; civilization should

126. Letter to William Nicol (24 June, 1787); Ferguson, I, pp. 96-97.

127. Letter to Tom Keats (7 July, 1818); Low, pp. 305-306.

be measured by the degree of its tolerance and not by the grandeur of its principles. Above all, it is apparent that he shared Burns's empathy with the individual against the abstract and the regular, as well as his sensuous imagination and his love of teasing exaggeration; if Keats did not expect his brother to be convinced of his society's barbarity, he at least, like Burns, would have wished him to be less confident of its sophistication.

Chapter 7

William Wordsworth: 1798-1807

Poverty makes men ridiculous.

(Francis Jeffrey, review of *Thalaba*, October, 1802)

Reviewing Southey's *Thalaba* in 1802, Jeffrey proclaimed the existence of a new school of poetry. Its most notable characteristic was its opposition to 'the established systems in poetry and criticism'¹ and its members included Southey, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Charles Lamb. References to a new school of poetry began to proliferate after the appearance of this review. Jeffrey, however, was probably himself influenced by a series of articles in the *Anti-Jacobin* in 1797.² The *Anti-Jacobin* had been established in that year under the editorship of William Gifford by supporters of Pitt as part of the escalating reaction against the French Revolution and its English sympathizers, a reaction which began, most commentators agree, with the September massacres of 1792. The principal target in the articles in question, as the most notable practitioner of the novel genre christened 'Jacobin poetry', was Southey (Jeffrey was to describe Southey as one of the 'chief champions and apostles' of the new school),³ though Coleridge and Lamb were also mentioned.⁴ 'Jacobin poets' were said to denounce all

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1. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 1 (October, 1802), 63-83; Madden, p. 68.
 2. See Peter A. Cook, 'Chronology of the "Lake School" Argument: Some Revisions', *Review of English Studies*, n.s., 28, 110 (May, 1977), 175-181.
 3. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 1 (October, 1802), 63-83; Madden, p. 68.
 4. Apart from Southey, Coleridge and Lamb, Charles Lloyd and another poet, who was not named, were also mentioned. Southey and Coleridge had collaborated in *The Fall of Robespierre* (1794) and the first edition of *Joan of Arc* (1796); Lamb and Lloyd had contributed poems to the second edition of Coleridge's *Poems* (1797). Derek Roper points out that George Dyer linked Wordsworth with the above four in a footnote on Pantisocracy in *The Poet's Fate* (1797) and suggests that Wordsworth might have been the unnamed fifth poet (Derek Roper, *Reviewing Before the 'Edinburgh' 1788-1802* (London, 1978), pp. 109-110).

laws as oppressive and to encourage eternal warfare between rich and poor. Of particular interest is the following representation of their practice -

A human being, in the lowest state of penury and distress, is a treasure to a reasoner of this cast. - He contemplates, he examines, he turns him in every possible light, with a view of extracting from the variety of his wretchedness new topics of invective against the pride of property.⁵

'Jacobin poetry' was thought to offend against the unity of decorum by bestowing, for divisive purposes, an untoward degree of attention on characters with little social or moral significance. The question to be asked is whether such criticism was a response to a new kind of poetry or whether it reflected a new conservatism in defining the constraints of decorum.

The so-called 'new school' was most remarkable, perhaps, for the persistence with which its supposed members denied their membership, though Coleridge was to hold Wordsworth's Preface to the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) responsible for the widespread belief in its existence.⁶ It would be fruitless, I think, to attempt in this short chapter to decide whether a new kind of 'Jacobin poetry' actually existed, in spite of these protestations, by examining whether its major poets, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, were, in fact, Jacobins. The political development of this triumvirate aroused fierce controversy amongst their contemporaries and is still a matter of dispute. The extent of their early radicalism is as dubious as the nature of their late conservatism and the path from the former to the latter was, in all three cases, tortuous. The three poets were frequently accused of political apostasy. Byron, for example, was reported to have remarked in a conversation with Thomas Medwin, referring to Wordsworth's appointment as Distributor of Stamps for Westmoreland in 1813 -

It is satisfactory to reflect, that where a man becomes a hireling and loses his mental independence, he loses also the faculty of writing well. The lyrical ballads, jacobinical and puling with

5. *Poetry of 'The Anti-Jacobin'*, edited by L. Rice-Oxley (Oxford, 1924), pp. 6-7.

6. Letter to Robert Southey, 9 February, 1813, in *The Collected Letters of Samuel Taylor Coleridge*, edited by E.L. Griggs, 6 vols (Oxford, 1956-1971), III (1959), p. 433.

affectation of simplicity as they were, had undoubtedly a certain merit...but, like brother Southey, he had his price; and since he has turned tax-gatherer, he is only fit to rhyme about asses and waggoners.⁷

Such accusations were levelled not only by political opponents. In 1809 Coleridge's periodical, *The Friend*, moved Southey to write -

Coleridge has vexed me by his *Friend* - the affectation of humility even to downright canting, is to me insufferable, and the folly of talking as he does about his former principles is still worse. It is worse than folly, for if he was not a Jacobine, in the common acceptation of that name, I wonder who the Devil was. I am sure I was, am still, and ever more shall be.⁸

In 1817 Southey, now Poet Laureate, the appointment to which Byron alluded in the passage quoted above, was subjected in the House of Commons to ridicule by the Whig M.P., William Smith, for the belligerence of his opposition to radicalism. Southey's early republican play, *Wat Tyler*, had just been published without his permission in order to expose the fact that he had once himself expounded the views which he was now determined to crush. In his defence Southey published *A Letter to William Smith*, of which Coleridge wrote -

What injudicious advisers must not Southey have had! it vexes me to the quick. Never yet did any human Being gain any thing by self-desertion. I shall never forget the *disgust*, with which Mackintosh's 'bear witness, I *recant*, *abjure*, and *abhor* the principles' - i.e. of his own *Vindiciæ Gallicæ*, struck his Auditors in Lincoln's Inn -. ⁹

If the political statements of the so-called 'new school' of poetry were so vexing, elusive and contradictory even to its supposed members, it is

7. Thomas Medwin's *Conversations of Lord Byron*, edited by E.J. Lovell (Princeton, 1966), p. 194.

8. Letter to Charles Danvers, 15 June, 1809; Curry, I, p. 511.

9. Letter to T.G. Street, 22 March, 1817; Griggs, IV (1959), p. 713. James Mackintosh published *Vindiciæ Gallicæ* in April, 1791 in reply to Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution*. He then became honorary secretary of the Friends of the People, an aristocratic Whig group of supporters of the French Revolution. After he was called to the bar at Lincoln's Inn in 1795, he became an admirer of Burke and introduced a course of lectures, delivered at Lincoln's Inn, on 'The Law of Nature and Nations' by saying, on 6 January, 1800, 'It is my intention to profess publicly and unequivocally that I abhor, abjure, and for ever renounce the French revolution, with its sanguinary history, its abominable principles, and for ever execrable leaders' (DNB).

unlikely that they would provide the best means of clarifying the nature of the poetry. In order to decide whether a new kind of poetry appeared in the 1790s it would probably be more appropriate to determine what its characteristics were thought to be, whether they were, in fact, novel and whether they represented an accurate description of the poetry discussed.

Jeffrey provided, in the review of *Thalaba*, the best summary of the characteristics thought to distinguish the 'new poetry' -

1. The antisocial principles, and distempered sensibility of Rousseau - his discontent with the present constitution of society - his paradoxical morality, and his perpetual hankerings after some unattainable state of voluptuous virtue and perfection.
2. The simplicity and energy (*horresco referens*) of Kotzebue and Schiller.
3. The homeliness and harshness of some of Cowper's language and versification, interchanged occasionally with the *innocence* of Ambrose Philips, or the quaintness of Quarles and Dr Donne.¹⁰

As may be deduced from this list, Jeffrey was concerned to qualify the originality of the new poets; their innovation, he declared, consisted mainly in their idiosyncratic choice of poetic models. Jeffrey was probably the most articulate opponent of French and German influences in English literature but he was not the only one. Burns, as we have seen, was also criticized, not only by Jeffrey, for what was thought to be his Rousseauist manner of preferring natural equality to social distinctions and his Germanic manner of rendering morality contingent on genius. Early reviewers criticized the first edition of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) similarly for forsaking tradition in favour of 'barbarous' models, such as Percy's *Reliques*.¹¹ German influence was detected in 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' and deplored;¹² the author of this criticism, unfortunately for

10. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 1 (October, 1802), 63-83; Madden, p. 69.

11. See, for example, the unsigned review, *New London Review*, 1 (January, 1799), 33-35, in *The Romantics Reviewed*, edited by D.H. Reiman, 9 vols (New York, 1972), II, pp. 792-793; Charles Burney, *Monthly Review*, second series, 29 (June, 1799), 202-210; *ibid.*, pp. 713-717 (Burney also comments unfavourably on the influence of Rousseau on the poems).

12. Robert Southey, *Critical Review*, second series, 24 (October, 1798), 197-204; Reiman, I, p. 309. See also the unsigned review, *Analytical Review*, 28 (December, 1798), 583-587; *ibid.*, p. 8.

Jeffrey's case, was Southey. Although the early reviews of *Lyrical Ballads* were by no means completely unfavourable and their number indicates more than casual interest, most of the elements of Jeffrey's later criticism are germinally present. Most of the criticisms seem to have been prompted at least as much by the Advertisement to the volume as by the poems themselves. In the Advertisement the poems are announced as experiments and it is feared that readers might find them too low in style to be poetic; it is noted that 'our elder writers',¹⁴ provided a model for the poetry. Most reviewers, indeed, found the poems more experimental than poetic, too vulgar and based on models too ancient.

However, the fears expressed in the Advertisement about the reception of the poems do not in themselves account for the reviewers' doubts. It was commonplace for poets writing about the rural poor to apologize for the lowness of their subject-matter, flattering the reader and appealing to his good will. Thomson, for example, addresses his patron in this way in *The Seasons* -

O Dodington! attend my rural song,
Stoop to my theme, inspirit every line...
(*Summer*, 29-30)

That this was not merely a courtly mode of address is demonstrated by Goldsmith in *The Deserted Village* -

Imagination fondly stoops to trace
The parlour splendours of that festive place...
(225-226)

This practice was an attempt to disarm the fastidious reader by anticipating his qualms, admitting their justice but at the same time tacitly suggesting that the man of true taste would not be dominated by them. The appeal in the Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* to 'readers of superior judgment',¹⁵ is in the same tradition and if its tone is perhaps more provocative than diplomatic, a similar tone, I have argued, in Burns's preface did not prevent his poems from being well received.

A wider perspective is needed to explain why both the *Lyrical Ballads* and Southey's early poetry were found systematically challenging to an

14. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 116.

15. Id.

unusual degree. None of the poets discussed in previous chapters was wholeheartedly in support of what Jeffrey called 'the established systems in poetry and criticism', though Crabbe was taken by Jeffrey to be their champion. Jeffrey continually praised Crabbe for his faithful, edifying and entertaining representations of that part of humanity most familiar to his average reader. Crabbe, however, was, apart from Wordsworth, the most controversial poet of the early nineteenth century. Nevertheless, although many reviewers differed with Jeffrey's estimation of Crabbe's poetry, some arguing that he was too accurate to be poetic and others that his subjects were too unfamiliar or too unflattering to be a source of pleasure, few disagreed with the critical standards with which Jeffrey judged Crabbe's achievement. Jeffrey's emphasis on a uniform morality, acceptable to the majority, was, as we have seen, commonplace in mid-eighteenth-century moral philosophy; the philosophical equivalent of Jeffrey's average reader was Adam Smith's impartial spectator, the arbiter of moral propriety, whom T.D. Campbell defines as 'the ordinary person when he is in the position of a non-involved spectator'.¹⁶ It was Jeffrey's expectation that poetry should express a conventional and uniform morality, rather than his insistence on a style of poetry that avoided the extremes of vulgarity and fantasy, that he shared with most of his fellow-reviewers. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, I have argued, the restrictions of decorum permitted a variety of styles but not a variety of moralities. It was because of this that the ambivalences in *The Deserted Village* resulting from Goldsmith's concern with the collapse of a moral consensus tended to be ignored. For similar reasons Crabbe became the champion of middle-class morality, though he was often one of its most subtle critics. Cowper was regarded as the archetypal poet of rural retirement; reviewers tended to concentrate on, and condescend to, his comfortable domesticity and to regard as incipiently insane the man who was amused, disturbed, fascinated and frightened by the strangeness of other individuals and other ways of life. Burns was more often seen as a prodigy than a moral sceptic and opponent of literary culture. For all of these poets their potential audience was also a

16. Campbell, p. 135.

major object of criticism. Reviewers were able to take advantage of contradictions in the poetry caused by this conflict of interest so as to read it in a manner which left preconceptions intact.

Wordsworth and Coleridge seem, to some extent, to have shared this diagnosis of the state of criticism; in the Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* they refer to 'that most dreadful enemy to our pleasures, our own pre-established codes of decision'.¹⁷ It would, of course, be impossible to judge the extent of their scepticism from this alone but it does reveal a willingness to question Jeffrey's 'established systems'. The question, however, is whether this willingness was sufficiently unusual and unequivocal to justify Jeffrey's alarm. Robert Mayo's influential article was responsible for reviving the debate about the extent of Wordsworth's originality. Mayo set out to demolish what he called 'the myth of "complete change"',¹⁸ the idea that the *Lyrical Ballads* represented a revolutionary innovation in poetry, and suggested that the fact that the poems were widely reprinted was one proof of their conformity to contemporary taste. Jeffrey himself admitted, in his review of Wordsworth's *Poems in Two Volumes* (1807), that the *Lyrical Ballads* had been popular but attributed their popularity to their novelty.¹⁹ A comparison between the theoretical challenges mooted in the Advertisement and the poems themselves is still probably the best means of approaching Wordsworth's poetry and in particular its representations of the rural poor. Since 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' was the most reprinted of all the *Lyrical Ballads*, it is a convenient means of adjudicating between Mayo and Jeffrey.

What is immediately striking about the poem is its narrative voice. It bears some similarity to the disingenuous voice of Bürger's supernatural ballads, which aroused great interest when they appeared in

17. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 116.

18. Robert Mayo, 'The Contemporaneity of the *Lyrical Ballads*', *PMLA*, 69 (1954), 486-522, p. 517.

19. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 11 (October, 1807), 214-231; Reiman, II, pp. 429-430.

translation in the *Monthly Magazine* in 1796.²⁰ The narrator of 'The Lass of Fair Wone', for example, seems, like the narrator of Wordsworth's poem, to share the reader's ignorance and surprise but at the same time hints at more than he reveals -

Why steals along the pond of toads
A gliding fire so blue,
That lights a spot where grows no grass,
Where falls no rain nor dew?
(5-8)²¹

We are in the company of a narrator neither omniscient nor uninitiated. This, we realize, is the special uncertainty induced by the supernatural, the hesitation of one who, like the narrator of 'The Thorn', cannot discover a rational explanation for an occurrence with which he is familiar and is tempted to offer an irrational one. The unnatural predicament of Harry Gill is introduced in a similar manner. However, the narrator of Wordsworth's poem does not insinuate. On the contrary, he betrays a note of impatience in his voice and represents Harry as ridiculous rather than mysterious.

Oh! what's the matter? what's the matter?
What is't that ails young Harry Gill?
That evermore his teeth they chatter,
Chatter, chatter, chatter still!
(1-4)

The character of the narrator is elusive. His use of language is inconsistent. For example, he employs, and even stresses, a colloquialism in juxtaposition with an elegantly inverted simile -

at her door the *canty* Dame
Would sit, as any linnet, gay.
(39-40)

There is a hint of parody in this occasional heightening of his prosaic narrative; he describes a 'splinter' as 'lusty' (51), for example, and the hedge as 'alluring' (59). Mary Jacobus has suggested that the poem is closer to Hannah More's imitation ballads than to either literary ballads

20. Stephen Parrish also notes a similarity with Bürger, though he assumes that Wordsworth 'adopts the point of view and the idiom of a rustic commentator' (p. 97).

21. Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads'* (1798), p. 284.

or genuine broadsides.²² Certainly Hannah More seems, like Wordsworth, to approach the style of neighbourly gossip while preserving a discreet superiority. Moreover, Wordsworth once confessed to Francis Wrangham that, like Hannah More, he had written some of his poems in the hope that they might be circulated by pedlars and so supplant those ballads which were popular but objectionable.²³ Yet Hannah More's artificial simplicity is more earnest than Wordsworth's and not at all wilful or arch. It is almost as though Wordsworth wished to draw attention to the absurdity of a sophisticated poet attempting to write a popular ballad. His poem is permeated with the sense of social distance - the distance between the narrator and the villagers, the distance between Goody Blake's hut and the village common, the distance between Goody Blake and the men who might pass by her door but would not enter, the distance between Goody Blake and Harry Gill.

The poem closest in tone to 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' is 'The Idiot Boy'. Of the narrative voice of this poem Mary Jacobus has offered a brilliant characterization. 'Wordsworth's exuberant narrative presence', she argues, defines an attitude to the material of amused indulgence which acknowledges the gap between reader and character but creates a context in which love is not inconsistent with superiority.²⁴ Certainly this amused exuberance, suggesting superiority, is also present in 'Goody Blake' but there is little scope for indulgence in Harry Gill's vicious and petty vengefulness and GoodyBlake's fierce and lonely independence. 'Goody Blake' is, I think, an odder and harsher poem than 'The Idiot Boy' and while a similar gap between reader and character is played upon, it is distinguished not so much by indulgence as by an impudence more reminiscent of Burns than any other poet. I have already drawn a parallel between the mock humility of Burns's preface and the

22. Ibid., p. 212.

23. Letter to Francis Wrangham, 5 June, 1808, in *The Letters of William and Dorothy Wordsworth, The Middle Years, Part I: 1806-1811*, edited by Ernest de Selincourt, second edition, revised by Mary Moorman (Oxford, 1969), p. 248.

24. Mary Jacobus, '"The Idiot Boy"', in *Bicentenary Wordsworth Studies*, edited by Jonathan Wordsworth (Ithaca, New York and London, 1970), pp. 238-265, pp. 245-247.

Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*. Other instances abound in the poems. For example, Wordsworth's address to his 'gentle reader' in 'Simon Lee' is similar to Burns's apostrophe to the 'gentle dames' in 'Tam o'Shanter'. In both cases an attempt ostensibly made to placate potentially hostile readers in fact reveals their objections to be misplaced. Wordsworth's use of this technique in 'Simon Lee' is more expansive than in 'Goody Blake', as if in keeping with Simon's poignantly comic sociability. The narrator of 'Goody Blake' is more aloof and his ironies are less charitable to the reader -

You would have said, if you had met her,
'T was a hard time for Goody Blake.
Her evenings then were dull and dead:
Sad case it was, as you may think,
For very cold to go to bed;
And then for cold not sleep a wink.
(43-47)

No-one, in fact, meets or speaks to Goody Blake in the poem except Harry Gill. The above stanza describes one of a series of hypothetical statements and observations mentioned by the narrator. The most common epithet used in connection with Goody Blake is 'poor', an ineffectual statement of fact and, with respect to one so independent, an inappropriate expression of pity. Wordsworth appears to be imputing a vague humanitarian concern to his readers expressed in terms which Henry Crabb Robinson described as 'vulgar every day Expressions',²⁵ terms, in other words, which would be more appropriately ascribed to the villagers and which the average reader might be expected to disown. As in 'The Thorn', Wordsworth encourages in his reader a feeling of superiority to the villagers' inadequate concern which he then challenges by assuming similarities between the reader and the villagers. What isolates Goody Blake most of all is that no-one really feels what she suffers. The narrator's precise calculations as to the extent of Goody Blake's poverty - her three hours' work at night could not pay for the candles used; she never has more than three days' fuel - and his evident appreciation of Harry Gill's waistcoats ('Good duffle grey, and flannel fine', 6) are pointed indications of

25. Letter to Thomas Robinson, 6 June, 1802, in *The Correspondence of Henry Crabb Robinson with the Wordsworth Circle (1808-1866)*, edited by E.J. Morley, 2 vols (Oxford, 1927), I, p. 43.

community values. Calibrations of property, not moral character or physical need, determine social relations; the narrator refers only to Harry Gill by his first name.

Wordsworth ingeniously merges the crux of the poem with the climax of the plot. One person takes to heart the implications of Goody Blake's poverty and that person is never warm again -

Young Harry heard what she had said:
And icy cold he turned away.

(103-104)

The narration is ambivalent enough to allow us to infer a sense of shame in the action of turning away; Wordsworth does not insist on the purely mechanical nature of the curse. When Goody Blake refuses to plead for herself and turns to God, instead of a thief and trespasser Harry Gill sees the defiant dignity of an old, frail and desperate woman.

She prayed, her withered hand uprearing,
While Harry held her by the arm...

(97-98)

It is the juxtaposition of 'withered' and 'uprearing', almost Miltonic in its context, which suggests the strength of Goody Blake's character beneath her frailty and which reveals Harry Gill, his continued grip made to seem especially petty, as a weak, persecuting bully. Yet this revelation results only in shared suffering, the sole moral alternative which the poem offers to reserved pity and self-interest as a response to poverty.

This, however, is an unduly solemn summary of a poem which I have described, borrowing Mary Jacobus's characterization of 'The Idiot Boy', as exuberant. As in Burns's 'Death and Dr Hornbook', a kind of comedy results when the supernatural is made to appear banal. Harry Gill's skeletal appearance at the end of the poem recalls Burns's description of Death -

fient a wame it had ava,
And then it had shanks,
They were as thin, as sharp an' sma'
As cheeks o' branks.

(39-42)

But whereas in Burns's poem there is a characteristic air of audacity, a refusal to be intimidated, in his not acknowledging Death to be other than human, in 'Goody Blake' it is the human that is made to seem inhuman. Wordsworth's exuberance in 'The Idiot Boy' seems humane because it echoes an excess in the characters which attests to their basic goodness - the

excessive anxiety of Betty Foy which reveals a deep maternal love, the excessive joy of Johnny which demonstrates his innocence, the excessive neighbourly concern of Susan Gale which leads her to forget her illness and set off in search of Betty and the boy. The whole absurd plot is set in motion by Betty's act of charity towards a neighbour and, moreover, it ends happily. In 'Goody Blake', on the other hand, the suffering is all that is excessive and the exuberance is at the characters' expense, making them seem ridiculous. There is a kind of élan in the working of the plot, in the precision of its reversals, which has nothing to do with any development of or revelation about the characters. They are played off against each other in a manner which obscures their individuality - Harry Gill is young and rich, Goody Blake is poor and old; 'poor', we have noted, is the most common expression used of Goody Blake and at the end of the poem Harry Gill is heard to say, in equally useless pity, 'Poor Harry Gill is very cold' (124). All the property that he has officiously protected, though he has much more than a sufficiency ('coats enough to smother nine', 8), cannot keep him warm. The cold moon, here, like the stars in 'The Thorn', a symbol of impersonal nature, presides over an abstract pattern of poetic justice rather than a human drama. If it would be a morbid joke to say of the poem that it is the most chilling of the *Lyrical Ballads*, it would nevertheless be a comment in keeping with its bizarre and abstract comedy.

Robert Mayo argued that the poem 'was quite in conformity with contemporary taste and interest'.²⁶ Its popularity would seem to support his argument. Dr Burney praised the poem in the *Monthly Review*, though with reservations. His comments might serve as a guide to the kind of considerations which would have occurred to a contemporary reader -

Distress from poverty and want is admirably described, in the '*true story of Goody Blake, and Harry Gill*': but are we to imagine that Harry was bewitched by Goody Blake? The hardest heart must be softened into pity for the poor old woman; - and yet, if all the poor are to help themselves, and supply their wants from the possessions of their neighbours, what imaginary wants and real anarchy would it not create? Goody Blake should have been relieved

26. Mayo, p. 502.

out of the *two millions* annually allowed by the state to the poor of this country, not by the plunder of an individual.²⁷

A further indication of the likely contemporary response is provided by imitations of the poem. How the poem was read may be inferred from what was thought worth imitating. For example, in Southey's 'The Witch', first published in 1799, the plot is basically similar but the treatment of it is very different.

CURATE

the poor old woman
Told me that she was forced to crawl abroad
And pick the hedges, just to keep herself
From perishing with cold, because no neighbour
Had pity on her age; and then she cried,
And said the children pelted her with snow-balls,
And wish'd that she were dead.

FATHER

I wish she was!
She has plagued the parish long enough!

CURATE

Shame, Farmer!
Is that the charity your bible teaches?

FATHER

My bible does not teach me to love witches.
I know what's charity; who pays his tithes
And poor-rates readier?

(84-95)²⁸

The comic tone of 'Goody Blake' is completely absent and the ballad metre has been replaced by a form of blank verse. Southey has evidently thought that a comic tone would be inappropriate to the serious lesson which his poem is intended to convey. Unlike Burney, Southey has realized that Wordsworth's poem distinguishes between a strict adherence to the law and Christian charity; the farmer who equates charity with the payment of tithes and poor-rates, Southey implies, is no less culpable than the farmer who insists on defending his property to the last twig. On the other hand, both Southey and Burney use the phrase 'the poor old woman', apparently assuming that the frequency of such adjectives in 'Goody Blake' was meant to define Wordsworth's idea of charity.

27. Charles Burney, *Monthly Review*, second series, 29 (June, 1799), 202-210; Reiman, II, p. 715.

28. Robert Southey, *Poems*, vol. 2 (1799), pp. 221-222.

An imitation more faithful to the original than Southey's was published by John Stagg, the blind bard of Cumberland, under the title 'Johnny Brown and Granny Bell'.²⁹ Stagg retains the ballad metre of Wordsworth's poem and something of its comic tone and, unlike Southey, does not explain away the curse as the farmer's superstition. However, in order to justify the tone, Stagg exaggerates the element of burlesque in the original. As a result, apparently, of Granny Bell's curse, Johnny Brown's best cow dies, his son is swindled and his daughter becomes pregnant. In seeking revenge, Johnny Brown attempts to shoot Granny Bell but kills his best mare instead; he then vows to burn her house while she is inside but in his sleep sets fire to his own barn. The comedy gives way to a serious resolution, developed perhaps from a hint in Southey's poem, in which Johnny Brown, at the head of a vengeful crowd, finds Granny Bell dead.

In both of these imitations the aspects which seem to me most puzzling in 'Goody Blake' have been either ignored or resolved in a conventional manner. Southey evades Burney's objection to the supernatural element in 'Goody Blake' by making his own poem a criticism of superstition; in his review of *Lyrical Ballads* Southey had worried that 'Goody Blake' might encourage 'the popular superstition of witchcraft'.³⁰ He also replaces the narrator's peculiar voice with the bland character of the curate. Southey's poem clearly belongs to the debate, often mooted, as we have seen, in poetry, about the causes of crimes committed by the poor, a debate to which Burney evidently assumed Wordsworth's poem also belonged. Stagg avoids the debate altogether by making his woman merely a rejected beggar; his poem is a conventionally sentimental one, enlivened by comic episodes but ultimately serious, about the necessity of benevolence.

There are, of course, elements in 'Goody Blake' which would have enabled it to be read as either a poem of sensibility or a poem of social comment. The poem is filled with expressions of pity, for example, and by making Goody Blake at once extremely assiduous and miserably poor

29. J. Stagg, *The Minstrel of the North; or, Cumbrian Legends* (London, 1810), pp. 130-134.

30. Robert Southey, *Critical Review*, second series, 24 (October, 1798), 197-204; Reiman, I, p. 308.

Wordsworth seems to be replying to the common argument that industry and thrift ensure well-being. Like Goldsmith in *The Deserted Village*, Wordsworth emphasizes the truth of the poem's plot; the reader is assured in the Advertisement that the poem 'is founded on a well-authenticated fact which happened in Warwickshire',³¹ and it is subtitled 'A True Story'. Yet as an unqualified assertion this is plainly incredible. Similarly as a bald and literal statement the ending of the poem ('Now think, ye farmers all, I pray, / Of Goody Blake and Harry Gill!', 127-128) is banal and ridiculous; it owes much, I think, to the ending of 'Tam o'Shanter'. Just as in Burns's poem the reader's expectations are made to seem inadequate by being inadequately satisfied, so it is difficult to interpret these aspects of 'Goody Blake' as anything but deliberate parodies of the didactic elements in traditional poems, an invitation to the reader to search for significances other than those which the conventions would lead him to expect. If there are levels of meaning at which the banality becomes truth and the supernatural extraordinary, then we are led to distrust our initially dismissive responses and the expectations which prompted them.

Wordsworth avoids giving intimations of an ideal society in which the antagonisms of Goody Blake and Harry Gill would be resolved. In Southey's poem attitudes are related in the conventional manner to social status and the characters are presented as types of their respective classes. His old woman, with the characteristic vulnerability of the poor, begs for care and protection. The farmer is 'prudent and industrious' (96) but lacks the benevolence which would make him an ideal type of the higher classes. Therefore the curate, who here fulfils the traditional function of the mediator in pastoral, must remind him of his proper social role. In 'Goody Blake', on the other hand, the social relations are confused. The narrator's social status is uncertain and that of the reader is ignored; Goody Blake displays a degree of industry and self-reliance usually attributed to the virtuous poor and yet is technically a thief. The conventional social pattern is replaced by a disturbing pattern of natural justice. The Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads*

31. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 117.

had prepared the reader for a scale of emphases, promising 'a natural delineation of human passions, human characters, and human incidents'.³² In 'Goody Blake', unlike Southey's poem, the facts of crime and poverty, the 'human incidents', are less important than the confrontation of individuals and, in turn, unlike Stagg's poem, the 'human characters' are less important than the peculiar transformation which takes place under the cold moon when Harry Gill sees into the condition of Goody Blake's being.

Even on the basis of 'Goody Blake' and 'The Witch' it is possible to see why Southey and Wordsworth attracted special animus. Early in his career Southey was probably the most radical of the major poets, representing the poor, usually without qualification, as innocent victims of social oppression. In *Wat Tyler* and also in poems published in the 1790s, such as the *Botany-Bay Eclogues*, he went beyond the pastoral paternalism of 'The Witch' and recommended a thoroughgoing rejection of the social hierarchy in favour of natural equality. More important than his endless experiments with metre and diction was the serious and sustained attention which he gave in his poems to the individual lives and histories of social outcasts, extending the literary categories for such figures beyond the sentimental and the comic. In 'Goody Blake' Wordsworth seems similarly critical of private property but his criticism is so vague and understated that the poem attracted the praise of the *Antijacobin Review*.³³ The poem is concerned with a marginal member of society but Wordsworth shows little interest in her actual or potential position within a larger social context beyond stressing her marginality. The similarity between Southey and Wordsworth is more superficial than real. Southey wrote one of the more critical reviews of *Lyrical Ballads*. Although Coleridge attributed this unfavourable review to a quarrel which he had recently had with Southey³⁴ and Southey did, in fact, privately

32. Ibid., p. 116.

33. W. Heath, *Antijacobin Review*, 5 (April, 1800), 434; Reiman, I, p. 22.

34. Letter to William Godwin, 29 March, 1811; Griggs, III (1959), p. 316.

express more admiration for the *Lyrical Ballads*,³⁵ his imitations show little understanding of Wordsworth's intentions.³⁶ It seems to me, then, that Jeffrey was mistaken in following the *Anti-Jacobin* and seeing Southey as a leader of a new school of poetry. Southey's early poetry, though it pushed existing literary conventions to an extreme, remained traditional. At the same time Mayo, I think, was wrong to deny that the *Lyrical Ballads* established a new direction for poetry. Wordsworth rejected existing conventions with deliberate thoroughness and in particular he was not concerned to link a consensus between poet and reader with a social consensus which would unite poor and rich, city and country. That aspect of decorum which established an implicit contract between poet and reader connecting the proprieties of the poem with the accepted proprieties of society was not accepted by Wordsworth as a necessary context for his poetry. Cowper's introspective fascination with other ways of life is perhaps the closest precedent for Wordsworth's neglect of the general types of social classes but Cowper's innovations were awkwardly qualified by a need to interest the reader and the particularity of his vision was always curbed by his public voice. In Wordsworth's poetry introspection becomes a peculiarly disembodied concern with the capacity for feeling. His poems tend to be both a test of the reader's own capacity and a guide but with very few concessions to the reader's conventional expectations.

Although Wordsworth's technique was, I believe, novel in 1798, his almost analytical concentration, in poems like 'Goody Blake', on the workings of emotion to the apparent exclusion of any personal sympathy with his characters is perhaps more deeply shocking to the modern reader than it would have been to his contemporaries. The poetry of sensibility, as we have seen, provided some precedent for the subordination of character and incident to passion. Its major aim was the evocation of emotion untrammelled by particularities of context. Many modern readers have found 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' offensive for seeming to justify such a

35. See, for example, his letter to John May, 1803, in *Selections from the Letters of Robert Southey*, edited by J.W. Warter, 4 vols (London, 1856), I, p.216.

36. See Mary Jacobus, 'Southey's Debt to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798)', 20-36.

practice by means of a utilitarian representation of the beggar as an object of sensibility. Some, in attempting to meet this objection, have suggested that Wordsworth's treatment of the beggar as a source of charity is peripheral to his concern for the beggar's freedom.³⁷ What seems to make this division of intent possible is that the detailed description of the beggar, his movements and surroundings, apparently contributes little to the section of the poem dealing with the record of charity which the beggar enables the villagers to compile. Indeed such detail was anathema to the poetry of sensibility. Poems about beggars had been commonplace for many years before 1798 but they tended to offer only the most stereotyped descriptions - tattered clothes, hoary locks - so that the reader's attention was not distracted from the appeal for pity. In 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', on the other hand, Wordsworth, like Cowper with his woodman, concentrates on trivial details which reveal the beggar's individuality. For example, the 'fixed and serious look / Of idle computation' (11-12) with which the beggar 'scans' (not 'counts' or 'scrutinizes') his scraps of bread suggests an anxiety become habitual. His 'palsied hand' is 'baffled' (16,18) as it attempts to save crumbs from the birds - a clever telescoping of physical and mental degeneration. The description of the beggar's movement extends this picture of degeneration, indicating the minimal control which he has even over the direction of his sight; his eyes are 'doomed so long to settle upon earth' (187) -

as he moves along
They move along the ground...
 (46-47)

It is as though a vaguely animate consciousness inhabits a largely inanimate body. Yet, although these details are all observed by the narrator, his language, unlike Cowper's, does not dramatize the differences in personality and class between the observer and the observed. Even the narrator's reference to his childhood (22-23) does not hint at any relationship but encourages us to see the beggar as an almost perpetual

37. See, for example, Cleanth Brooks, 'Wordsworth and Human Suffering: Notes on Two Early Poems'; Hilles and Bloom, pp. 373-387; Harold Bloom, *The Visionary Company: A Reading of English Romantic Poetry* (London, 1961), pp. 178-184.

symbol of extreme age. The narrator is an impersonal observer; he introduces the poem as if it were a parable with a biblical 'And' (2). It is this absence of any individual and particular feeling for the beggar or, at least, this readiness to subordinate what feeling there is to a doctrinal recommendation of charity that is disturbing.

I have already suggested that this unease is not owing to any deep similarity between 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' and the poetry of sensibility. The poem may, like 'Goody Blake', have been sufficiently similar to that kind of poetry to be acceptable to contemporary readers. Indeed in 1794 Peter Pindar published a sentimental poem entitled 'The Blind Beggar' which has so many similarities with Wordsworth's poem that it may well have been a model for it.³⁸ Nevertheless, Wordsworth studiously avoids sentimentality about the beggar's connection with the natural world - the dogs tire of barking at him and the birds approach only for the food which he would deny them if he could; his vision of nature consists mainly of the straw, leaves and wheel-ruts on the road in front of him, 'one little span of earth' (50). The blessing with which the poem ends is not benign in any condescending sense; the struggle envisaged against the snow and wind is an arduous one. Peter Pindar's poem ends, by contrast, with the old beggar living in the narrator's

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38. [John Wolcot], *Pindariana; or, Peter's Portfolio* (London, 1794), pp. 41-45. Compare, for example, the following lines in 'The Blind Beggar' -

I am *thy* debtor - much to *thee* I owe;
For learn - the greatest blessing is to *bless*.
(11-12)

Thy shatter'd, yet thine awe-inspiring form,
Shall give the village-lads the soften'd soul,
To aid the victims of LIFE's frequent storm...
(21-23)

Lo, not the *little birds* shall chirp in vain,
And hov'ring round me, vainly court my care;
While I possess the life-preserving grain,
Welcome ye chirping tribe to peck your share.
(37-40)

(The difference between this stanza and the equivalent episode in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' underlines Wordsworth's avoidance of sentimentality.)

There shall our feather'd friend, the bird of morn,
Charm thee with orisons to opening day...
(61-62)

Wordsworth reveals a knowledge of Peter Pindar in a letter to William Mathews dated 21 March, 1796; *Early Years*, p. 169.

cottage. The point may be made even clearer by comparing the conclusion of 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' with a similar section in 'Tintern Abbey' -

let the moon
Shine on thee in thy solitary walk;
And let the misty mountain-winds be free
To blow against thee...

(134-137)

So that the bond with an essential and universal nature might remain intact Wordsworth prays, on behalf of his sister, for free access to the complete range of experience (we need only recall what the moon signifies in 'Goody Blake'). In his sister, in 'Tintern Abbey', that bond manifests itself as a spontaneous joy; in the beggar it is a vital anxiety which would disappear if he were afforded the protection of the workhouse. Jonathan Wordsworth has argued that this similarity between 'Tintern Abbey' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' reveals that 'in Wordsworthian terms the beggar does not suffer... Wordsworth no more wishes suffering on him than he wishes it on his sister'.³⁹ However, to suggest that 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' should be read with due allowance for a certain 'Wordsworthian' eccentricity, as Jonathan Wordsworth seems to be advocating, is to blur the distinction between it and conventional poetry of sensibility. To assume that Wordsworth's imagination, when he envisages the beggar's struggle with frost and snow, does not recognize suffering is to interpret what seems to me to be a unique poem as a commonplace confrontation between sentimentalism and utilitarianism. The very rhythm of the verse, in fact, accentuates the brute violence of the natural forces with which the beggar will have to contend; the word 'beat', for example, has behind it the weight of the whole preceding line and a force accumulated by assonance ('sweeps', 'heath'), conveying the momentum of the wind -

let the chartered wind that sweeps the heath
Beat his grey locks against his withered face.

(175-176)

We overlook the poem's audacity if we ignore the fact that real and ordinary suffering is vividly realized in these lines and yet at once accepted and bestowed on another as a blessing. Anxiety Wordsworth sees as the condition of a vital life (177-178). His readiness to impute his own feelings to

39. Jonathan Wordsworth, p. 146.

others may seem self-indulgent but then he regards self-congratulation as the basis of a sense of pity essential to charity (122-127). This is sufficiently breathtaking in itself to remove the poem from any category of sentimental poetry.⁴⁰ It was common for poems critical of the workhouse, of which *The Village* was the most famous, to compare the workhouse's cold impersonality with the warmth of the family or community. The villagers in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', however, like those in 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill', are isolated and preoccupied; they are preserved from complete selfishness by a barely human beggar. Wordsworth does not simply tinker with the sentimental dichotomy, as Jonathan Wordsworth suggests, replacing images of the family with those of benign Nature as the moral positive of the poem. The 'eye of Nature' ('So in the eye of Nature let him die!', 197) is hardly the moist eye of the benevolent reader. Nature's 'spirit and pulse of good' (77) do not ensure well-being, the deadening security of the workhouse, but a precarious existence within a scattered community. It is because the acts of kindness are fitful that they are felt; it is because the life is difficult that it is invigorating. The beggar's freedom not only guarantees the quality of life in the community but symbolizes it; it seems to me, therefore, impossible to divide the poem in the way that some critics have sought to do.

Yet even when all similarities with a conventionally self-centred sentimentality are discounted, an objection remains; no-one, as far as I am aware, has improved upon Charles Lamb's very fine and very famous explanation of it in a letter to Wordsworth in 1801 when he refers to

the delicate and curious feeling in the wish for the Cumberland Beggar, that he may have about him the melody of Birds, altho' he hear them not. - Here the mind knowingly passes a fiction upon herself, first substituting her own feelings for the Beggar's, and, in the same breath detecting the fallacy, will not part with the wish... I will just add that it appears to me a fault in the

40. For the debate over the status of pity in the eighteenth century, see Aldridge. Advocates of sentimentalism insisted that benevolence was instinctive and that therefore pity was a natural emotion whereas its opponents, such as Mandeville, argued that pity was an artificial imitation of love, compromised by its associations with pleasure and self-interest. As far as I am aware, no-one before Wordsworth had approved of pity *because* of its connection with self-interest.

Beggar, that the instructions conveyed in it are too direct and like a lecture: they don't slide into the mind of the reader, while he is imagining no such matter. - An intelligent reader finds a sort of insult in being told...⁴¹

This is a more specific objection than Keats's criticism of Wordsworth's 'palpable design', for Keats's criticism applies to all of Wordsworth's poetry. Every unusual tone, phrase or emphasis, every discrepancy between incident and passion announces itself in Wordsworth's poetry as an instructive challenge; as Wordsworth advises his readers in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, each of his poems has a 'worthy purpose'.⁴² Keats's statement merely measures the difference in styles between the two poets. Stephen Gill has argued that 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' retains its integrity because its didacticism is quite open and so enables the reader to evaluate its merits.⁴³ This answers Keats but not, I think, Lamb. Lamb is not objecting to the didacticism of the poem but to its condescension in openly drawing the reader's attention to what is already implied in passages such as the one he discusses. As Lamb has realized, Wordsworth distinguishes between a rational attention to the beggar's physical needs, which would be an abstract application of 'the moral law' (136), and the generous disposition which the beggar arouses in his benefactors and leaves behind him. Just as calculations of the extent of Goody Blake's poverty revealed an inadequate concern, so to attempt to match the charitable gift to the beggar's minimal capacities would be less humane, in its neglect of the necessary conditions for a proper life (a caring community, hope for and interest in the future), than to wish the beggar to have the company of birds he cannot hear. The narrator's slip reveals a tendency to assume that his feelings are also the beggar's, a faith in a common humanity that a more calculating charity would disregard. Yet - and this is, perhaps, Lamb's real point - to set out Wordsworth's implications logically, as I have just attempted to do and as

41. Letter to William Wordsworth, 30 January, 1801, in *The Letters of Charles and Mary Anne Lamb*, edited by E.W. Marris (Ithaca, New York, 1975-), I (1975), p. 265.

42. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 124.

43. Stephen C. Gill, 'Wordsworth's Breeches Pocket: Attitudes to the Didactic Poet', *Essays in Criticism*, 19, 4 (October, 1969), 385-401.

Wordsworth himself does in the poem, is to misrepresent them, for it is only in what Wordsworth calls the 'after-joy' (101) of generosity that the reason assents to what it would otherwise reject as fallacious. Similarly it is only in the poet's act of blessing that his instructions 'slide into the mind of the reader'.

Lamb's objection demonstrates that it is more difficult to distinguish the poem from utilitarianism than from sentimentalism. Mary Jacobus suggests that the poem 'is an argument for the uses of compassion that sets out to beat the utilitarians at their own game'.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, if the subordination of the beggar to the doctrine which he is intended to prove is too utilitarian, the poet's own compassion might be seriously put into question and his argument compromised. Wordsworth's tendency to pontificate (''T is Nature's law', 73) does suggest that his compassion is doctrinal only and indicates, perhaps, a rigorous suppression of the doubts about the essential goodness of Nature that disrupt 'Tintern Abbey'. Nevertheless, it is redeemed, to some extent, by the scepticism which he indicates about the effect of his poem. Although the poem is more public than 'Goody Blake', being in blank verse, and its address to the statesmen echoes *The Deserted Village*, it is not really a political poem. The address seeks to insult rather than to persuade -

ye proud,
Heart-swoln, while in your pride ye contemplate
Your talents, power, or wisdom, deem him not
A burthen of the earth!

(70-73)

It is purposive rather than functional, attempting to define an attitude rather than effect a result. If the poem, like all 'solicitudes of love' (113), does not aim to change much, it at least remembers the little, nameless acts of kindness and love ('Tintern Abbey', 34-35) and, in naming them, becomes itself an act of kindness, an exemplary expression of love rather than a statement of policy.

Or perhaps it would be more accurate to describe the poem as an expression of a state of love, for the generous disposition which the beggar arouses in the narrator does not really require an object. The narrator's contemplation of the beggar is free of the beggar's own anxiety

44. *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads' (1798)*, p. 182.

about his future. When Wordsworth outlined in a letter to Coleridge a scheme of classification for a future edition of his collected poems, he placed 'Goody Blake' in a class consisting

chiefly of objects most interesting to the mind not only by its personal feelings or a strong appeal to the instincts or natural affections, but to be interesting to a meditative and imaginative mind either from the moral importance of the pictures or from the employment they give to the understanding affected through the imagination and to the higher faculties.⁴⁵

I have already said that the ease with which Wordsworth is able to separate moral significance from personal feelings is unsettling in both 'Goody Blake' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar'; here it is even suggested that affection is a lower level of response than meditation or imagination. 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', Wordsworth writes, is intended for a separate category of poems on old age but if this implies that its appeal is meant to be more instinctive than that of 'Goody Blake', it is, nevertheless, instinct transmogrified as philosophy; Wordsworth shows more interest in discovering the causes and consequences of responses to the old beggar than he does in simply responding.

To the extent that 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' demonstrates that this detachment is not merely the impartiality of the doctrinaire it is reassuring; Wordsworth is too sceptical in the poem of 'moral law' (136) to design and manipulate puppets as illustrations of it. But for further reassurance, for evidence that Wordsworth's impersonality is not easily won, we must look elsewhere. Though Wordsworth, in his letter to Coleridge, places it in the same category as 'Goody Blake', 'Resolution and Independence' has an obviously agitated narrator.

'The Old Cumberland Beggar' begins with the words 'I saw', directing attention at once to the process of seeing rather than the object seen; its narrator, rather than the beggar, is the pivot of the poem, selecting and interpolating. Yet the poem is narrated with the authority of a parable. 'Resolution and Independence' begins as a tale ('There was') and yet its objectivity is only apparent; the subject of the tale from the outset is the narrator himself. We are told first of the distant singing of birds, then more particularly of the song of the stock dove

45. Letter to S.T. Coleridge, 5 May, 1809; *Middle Years*, I, p. 335.

and the alternate notes of the magpie and jay, and then of the ubiquitous sound of running water.

There was a roaring in the wind all night;
The rain came heavily and fell in floods;
But now the sun is rising calm and bright;
The birds are singing in the distant woods;
Over his own sweet voice the Stock-dove broods;
The Jay makes answer as the Magpie chatters;
And all the air is filled with pleasant noise of waters.

(1-7)

These apparently unrelated events, separated by Wordsworth's punctuation, may be linked by an inferred sequence of the narrator's experience. He wakes with the bright sun and notices, first of all, remembering the previous night's storm, the comparative calmness which enables him to hear the faint birdsong; he is able to distinguish the tunes and then relaxes with a pleasurable sense of repletion ('all the air is filled'), letting the birds merge again with the background noise. The passage is, in fact, so thoroughly imbued with the narrator's presence that it is difficult to distinguish a sequence of events in nature from the sequence of the narrator's sensations.

A similar process of perception, becoming gradually more alert and then lapsing, is described later in the poem. When the narrator first comes upon the leech-gatherer, he seems like 'a huge stone' (57), then a sea-beast, then an extremely old man and then a cloud. This sequence is as unusual as the earlier one was ordinary. Indeed, it does not resemble a sequence so much as a groping for an adequate response. In a letter to Sara Hutchinson Wordsworth referred to a 'feeling of spirituality or supernaturalness' in the passage.⁴⁶ The narrator, coming unexpectedly upon the leech-gatherer, has to reassure himself that what seems an apparition is really human; each simile is an analogue of the various stages of his changing and adapting emotions. The narrator's first response to the sudden appearance of the leech-gatherer is a banal hyperbole which registers little more than the extremity of his surprise - 'The oldest man he seemed that ever wore grey hairs' (56). The progression from this to the clever ratiocination of the next stanza ('As a huge stone is sometimes seen to lie...') seems forced, as though

46. Letter to Sara Hutchinson, 14 June, 1802; *Early Years*, p. 366.

the narrator is seeking comfort in generalizations ('Wonder to all who do the same espy', 59) that will explain away the disturbance which this very individual experience evidently causes him. Yet the sense of threat, of awe, even of repulsion is still apparent in the images of the huge boulder 'couched' (59) overhead like an animal of prey and the 'sea-beast' (62) which seems to combine a human capacity for pleasure with the movement of a reptile and the indifference of a stone. Towards the end of the sequence the narrator again makes a comparison with an inanimate object, this time a cloud. Perhaps, however, it is not fanciful to discern a new confidence in this comparison. The leech-gatherer now seems ethereal rather than merely inhuman; the narrator's sense of wonder is no longer defensive. He has been able to approximate the leech-gatherer to a human scale of reference, investing him with an imagined past of suffering, 'more than human' (70) admittedly and yet human too. The sequence ends with a beautiful image - the old man 'unsettling' himself (78) like the pond which he stirs, as if he were in transition between his natural surroundings and human life and finding the process uncomfortable. The hint of comedy is superb, recalling the earlier reference to 'life's pilgrimage' where the tone is similarly precarious -

His body was bent double, feet and head
Coming together in life's pilgrimage...
(66-67)

Wordsworth manages to convey here, with some flippancy, a sense of futility, implying that degeneration is all that is progressive in life. Yet this flippancy is balanced by the suggestion that the leech-gatherer 'in his extreme old age' (65) is nearing a spiritual goal which we all seek perforce because we are mortal and which, we hope, will somehow justify the decay to which we are subject; 'life's pilgrimage' becomes, movingly, an arduous journey towards reconciliation with oneself.

Contradictory feelings of contempt and humility coincide in the presence of this contradictory old man in a kind of reserved judgment. The notion of decline which has so depressed the narrator is subtly linked to an image of circularity and continuity. Henry Crabb Robinson was once told by his brother that Otway's description of a witch ('wrinkled hag with age grown double') was the most 'disgusting idea of *meanness*' that

could be conceived.⁴⁷ It is the very 'meanness' of the leech-gatherer, so completely antithetical to the proud and youthful Poets, Chatterton and Burns, and therefore to the narrator's image of himself, that makes him seem, in his barren surroundings ('Good God! Such a figure, in such a place', Wordsworth wrote to Sara),⁴⁸ repellent, ridiculous and yet awesome, a confirmation of the radical disturbance of the narrator's previously easy relationship with the external world. He is such a caricature of the narrator's worst fears that his being alive at all is both an anomaly and a reproach.

The final image of the old man 'unsettling' encapsulates the whole range of the narrator's fluctuating perceptions, bringing together the comic and the spiritual, and yet fails to resolve them, for the old man still vacillates between the animate and inanimate. It is impossible to tell whether he is emerging from the natural world or merging with it, assimilating himself to the motion of the pond. The spiritual aspect of the confrontation is barely present, balancing the element of farce. The old man seems, but only seems, to read in the book of nature (81); the narrator is uncertain whether he has been led to him 'by a peculiar grace' (50). The pool may lie 'bare to the eye of heaven' (54) but even that phrase suggests that 'the eye of heaven' is capable of being obstructed. Having lost his early imperturbable manner of registering an essential unity between man and nature ('All things that love the sun', 8), the narrator is compelled to search for a proper perspective. But as he continues uneasily to do so, his initial distrust gives way to the beginnings of a subdued faith. His curiosity becomes an eagerness to learn.

The whole passage, like the leech-gatherer himself, is almost but not quite circular in form. At the end of his initial encounter the narrator is as far from a spontaneous and unified apprehension of the leech-gatherer as at the beginning but he is now working his way towards an acceptance of the gulf between them. Endings in the poem, it has frequently been pointed out, constantly recall beginnings. The sudden

47. Letter from Thomas Robinson, 4 October, 1802; Morley, I, p. 47.

48. Letter to Sara Hutchinson, 14 June, 1802; *Early Years*, p. 367.

change of mood in the very last stanza, for example, mirrors an equally sudden transformation in the very first when the nocturnal storm gives way to a brilliant morning. The poem plays upon but never succumbs to the pathetic fallacy, for though the natural world provides correspondences with the human one, it is never subordinated to it; on the contrary, these correspondences are the burden of the poem. The narrator, for instance, remembering the brilliant morning, compares himself to a hare and describes himself as 'even such a happy Child of earth' (31) but this self-consciousness in itself belies the comparison, suggesting that the narrator's connection with nature is now a matter of will rather than being; it helps to explain the despondency which would otherwise seem yet another sudden change. At the beginning of the poem the narrator's sense of himself is submerged totally in what he experiences. When the poem changes setting from indoors to out of doors with a euphoric leap across the stanza break, we do not need to be told that the euphoria is the narrator's as he moves outside. When the hare is described raising a glittering mist for the sheer beauty and fun of it, we know that it is the narrator's imagination that is imputing a sense of purposeful enjoyment to the hare. His involvement is so intense that the distinction between man and nature is blurred; for the moment the hare and even the mist seem human.

The description of the morning is the only part of the poem in the present tense. When the narration moves back into the past tense in the third stanza, the vivid observations become vague and truncated memories ('the pleasant season', 'the playful hare', 19, 30) mediated by self-consciousness ('I saw the hare', 15). The narrator can no longer unthinkingly include himself in 'all things' (8) and such has been the fusion of self and nature that this causes a crisis of identity. His meeting with the leech-gatherer, the scheme of correspondences might lead us to expect, will restore the immediacy of his relationship with nature. One critic indeed argues that in the final stanza the narrator achieves 'a synthesis which joins the world of spirit with the world of nature'.⁴⁹ Another sees in the conclusion 'an irresponsibility founded

49. Alan Grob, 'Process and Permanence in *Resolution and Independence*', *ELH*, 28 (1961), 89-100, p. 99.

on relief, coupled with a very humorous *glee*...at the ass he has been making of himself'.⁵⁰ Others have found the poem's ending too jaunty, as if the poem had been distorted to accommodate an abstract symmetry.⁵¹ Robert Marchant suggests that the ending is awkward because the narrator attempts to force a reconciliation out of what is merely another datum of experience in his meeting with the leech-gatherer; he is 'trying to laugh off a strangeness he is unable to fathom'.⁵² Marchant's suggestion points, I think, to an alternative reading which is perhaps less inconclusive than he allows. As we have already noted, the poem's circles are imperfect; they tend to leave a gap of uncertainty. 'Resolution and Independence' concludes with a resolution derived from a conditional statement ('I could have laughed myself to scorn', 137) and dependent on a prayer ('"God," said I, "be my help and stay secure"', 139). The tone of the conclusion is, I believe, deliberately ambivalent; it might well be jaunty or, as the title hints, grimly resolute; the narrator's hypothetical laughter is self-punishing in intention. We are left unsure of the precise nature of the narrator's new outlook; we cannot even be certain that it will have any effect. Moreover, his resolution, it seems to me, involves as much of a retreat as a progression.

He never, for example, recaptures that earlier spontaneity, the capacity to dissolve himself into his surroundings at a whim, hearing and then not hearing, 'as happy as a boy' (18). He seems, at first, to reach into and back from the leech-gatherer in a similarly casual way but correspondences now appear as similes and his scheme of things requires painful reconstruction. Nothing in the poem suggests that this reconstruction

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50. Anthony E.M. Conran, 'The Dialectic of Experience: A Study of Wordsworth's *Resolution and Independence*', *PMLA*, 75, 1 (March, 1960), 66-74, p. 74.
51. See, for example, James Smith, 'Wordsworth - A Preliminary Survey', *Scrutiny*, 7, 1 (June, 1938), 33-55, p. 54.
52. Robert Marchant, *Principles of Wordsworth's Poetry* (Swansea, 1974), pp. 13-14, 28. See also Geoffrey Hartman, *Criticism in the Wilderness: The Study of Literature Today* (New Haven, 1980) - 'Wordsworth interprets his laughter morally and invents an exit - a Chaucerian "sentence" - to a perplexity which really has no end.' (p. 30).

might be aided by a resolution consciously taken. The narrator's despondency merely happens; he records the fact before giving some reasons for it and even these he describes as 'untoward' (53). He never fully accepts the accusation of irresponsibility which he levels at himself (36-42); it remains a question. When he adopts the leech-gatherer as a kind of talisman to replace the idea of the Poet, we cannot assume that he has accepted his earlier characterization of poets as martyrs to their own emotions. What we do know is that the narrator has agreed to relinquish his childlike optimism as well as his despair; he turns away from the carefree, aimless running of the hare towards the weary, purposeful wandering of the leech-gatherer. A natural plenitude of joy thoughtlessly indulged gives way to a severe discipline, in which a reminder of perseverance is gratefully received as 'something given' (51).

Peter Ure has argued that the Cumberland beggar and the leech-gatherer both 'suffer their own variety of displacement... [T]hey dwindle or expand, break up or fall aside, as the poetic need dictates'.⁵³ 'Resolution and Independence' helps us to see, I think, that such displacement is, in an important sense, the subject of all three poems already discussed. The leech-gatherer, for example, is elusive not merely because Wordsworth pays insufficient attention to him; elusiveness is part of his very being.

A gentle answer did the old Man make,
In courteous speech which forth he slowly drew...
(85-86)

This curious description suggests more than the laborious formality of a very old man unaccustomed to company. His reply is from himself but not of himself. Instead of speaking he, as it were, produces a speech. His detached manner at once indicates a depth of character and leaves it unplumbed. The leech-gatherer, though human enough to provide the narrator with a model of behaviour, is also inhuman enough to be mysterious and disturbing, eluding the narrator's efforts at assimilation, his perceptual associations and his repeated interrogation. The leech-gatherer's contradictions frustrate the most wilful attempts at resolution. The

53. Peter Ure, 'Wordsworth's *Michael*: The Picture of a Man', *Durham University Journal*, 44, 1 (December, 1951), 1-9, p. 4.

narrator's selfless and carefree involvement with the hare reveals a faith in the essential sameness of man and nature which proves to be limited and temporary. Resolution in the sense of achieved harmony and independence as self-deification (47) must dwindle, by an inevitable process of decay, to resolution in the sense of resolve ('Yet still I persevere') and independence from the will to resolution in the former sense ('and find them where I may') (126). The displacement which the leech-gatherer suffers in the poem is a measure of the narrator's estrangement from both man and nature but, as the 'Child of earth' (31) is exposed to the experience of suffering, it also indicates a necessary growth and prepares for a kind of reconciliation which does not depend solely on moments of spontaneous joy or the exercise of will but which is able to bear 'Solitude, pain of heart, distress, and poverty' (35). This is the hope, at least, with which the poem ends. The leech-gatherer provides a lesson which the narrator cannot simply accept but must resolve to learn. The narrator's impersonal detachment in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' is perhaps more explicable in the light of 'Resolution and Independence', for it is the impersonal detachment of the leech-gatherer. If the narrator readily imputes to the Cumberland beggar his own feelings, perhaps it is because he cannot know and depend on anything else with as much certainty. Perhaps it is also a question of survival. Harry Gill's downfall occurs when, in an instant of perception, he enters too fully into someone else's suffering. 'Goody Blake' illustrates 'the power of the human imagination' over 'our physical nature',⁵⁴ and suggests that Wordsworth's attitude to the imagination was far from unequivocal.

And yet it is also by means of such momentary occurrences - the unconscious acts of love which the Cumberland beggar calls forth, the flash of insight in which the leech-gatherer's life is pictured to the mind's eye - that the links between men and between man and nature are reaffirmed. Geoffrey Hartman's memorable exploration of 'Wordsworth's largest dichotomy: Nature and Mind',⁵⁵ suggests that Nature was for Wordsworth both a source of strength and an agent of extinction; he saw his task as establishing the independence of Mind without risking its isolation.

54. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 150.

55. Geoffrey Hartman, *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814* (New Haven and London, 1964), p. 190.

'Resolution and Independence' confirms an impression already gained from 'Goody Blake' and 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', that Wordsworth's interest did not really lie in the immediate social and political implications of his characters' situations. Although Wordsworth once described the leech-gatherer as the victim of 'an unjust state of society',⁵⁶ indications of injustice are only minimally present in the poem. Wordsworth places less importance on the fact that the leech-gatherer's occupation is a consequence of poverty (99-100) than on his role as divine 'admonishment' (112). If even an individual's relationship with the external world cannot be taken for granted, Wordsworth implies, then social and political considerations become secondary.

Before I become more definite in my generalizations, however, I must consider a poem which Peter Ure puts forward as an exception to the pattern established by 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' and 'Resolution and Independence'. Certainly in 'Michael' the original suffering remains the central focus of attention and is not complicated or overwhelmed by the attempt to come to terms with it. Yet the displacement in 'Michael' is even larger than that in the other poems discussed, for the poem begins and ends with a pile of stones and Michael dwindles away altogether. If the narrator's relation to the narrative does not loom so large in this poem, it still provides the starting-point and context. The tale has significance for the narrator because of the familiar natural surroundings in which it took place; his affection for 'the fields and hills' (25) precedes and induces a love of the tale and what it relates -

hence this Tale, while I was yet a Boy
Careless of books, yet having felt the power
Of Nature, by the gentle agency
Of natural objects, led me on to feel
For passions that were not my own...

(27-31)

The mention here of books suggests that they may perform a function similar to Nature's. The similarity is pressed further elsewhere in the poem when the narrator refers to hills

56. Letter to Sara Hutchinson, 14 June, 1802; *Early Years*, p. 367.

Which, like a book, preserved the memory
Of the dumb animals, whom he had saved...

(70-71)

If a poem, such as 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', can be an act of love, it may also be a record and a reminder, keeping alive bonds that might otherwise have perished with time and encouraging the creation of new ones by linking the reader's experience with what had previously been outside it. In 1805 Wordsworth wrote to Sir George Beaumont that the object of all liberal arts was

to assist Nature in moving the affections, and surely, as I have said, the affections of those who have the deepest perception of the beauty of Nature, who have the most valuable feelings, that is, the most permanent, the most independent, the most ennobling, connected with nature and human life.⁵⁷

Poetry may complement Nature, then, but only by drawing upon an existing capacity for feeling the influence of Nature. Everyone may 'see' the heap of stones but only 'a few natural hearts' (36) will 'notice' it. Wordsworth begins his narration with a familiar device, a challenge to the reader in the form of a barbed apology, but adds a dedication to

youthful Poets, who among these hills
Will be my second self when I am gone.

(38-39)

The dedication seeks to ensure a continuity of influence, love of Nature and love of Poetry reciprocating with each other. In a way the dedication, like the heap of stones, is a kind of covenant.

It is surely odd that Wordsworth, who couches his introduction in such specific and exclusive terms, concentrating on those readers who will be his 'second self' with a love for 'these hills', should impersonate a travel guide. Yet the introduction is an invitation as well as a challenge; it is intended to encourage (6) as well as to chasten. The sub-title for 'Michael' is 'A Pastoral Poem' and it will be remembered that the central character of early eighteenth-century pastoral was often the casual tourist who would travel into the country in order to compare rural and urban lifestyles. Admittedly Wordsworth's use of 'pastoral' in the description 'pastoral mountains' (5) suggests that in this poem the word has more of an agricultural than a literary sense; the alternatives

57. Letter to Sir George Beaumont, 17 October, 1805; *ibid.*, p. 627.

compared are more likely to be the isolation of the shepherd's occupation and 'the public way' (1) than the city and country of conventional pastoral. Nevertheless, the poem is not initially addressed to anyone in particular and the narrator's manner of describing the local terrain would suggest that he has the tourist in mind as much as anyone else. The purpose of the introduction is not only to alert the reader to what may seem insignificant in the poem and to indicate the kind of attention that should be paid but, by situating this particular guide in this particular landscape, Wordsworth also sets out in miniature the relations between reader, poet and sense of place which the poem will explore in depth. The pastoral poem, like the 'pastoral mountains', might seem forbidding but with a proper guide it opens out. And by leaving the persona of the narrator vague - he is at first a guide addressing everyone indiscriminately and then a story-teller with a circle of intimates - Wordsworth places the onus on the reader of discovering the precise nature of his relation to the poem.

Yet one thing is predetermined. The reader's relation to the poem can never be unmediated; *pace* Peter Ure, displacement is an integral part of it. As a tourist the reader's experience is fundamentally divergent from Michael's way of life, as described in the poem -

the storm, that drives
The traveller to a shelter, summoned him
Up to the mountains...

(56-58)

John Barrell undervalues the poem by suggesting that in this respect it is little different from a picturesque exercise.⁵⁸ The purpose of the picturesque was to assimilate an alien landscape to the observer's taste. The purpose of the narrator as guide in 'Michael' is to emphasize a difference between the reader's experience and that related in the poem while encouraging the reader towards a recognition and acceptance of that difference. It is because Michael's way of life is so distinctive that it contributes to what Wordsworth called 'comprehensiveness of thinking and feeling'.⁵⁹ Barrell's interpretation in *The Dark Side of the Landscape*

58. *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 183.

59. Letter to John Wilson, 7 June, 1802; *Early Years*, p. 356.

is significantly different and, I think, preferable; he writes that Michael's relationship with nature is one 'which must exclude guide, traveller, poet, *observers* of all sorts'.⁶⁰ Yet in his *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface* (1815) Wordsworth criticizes 'the pride that induces [the reader] to dwell upon those points wherein men differ from each other, to the exclusion of those in which all men are the same'.⁶¹ The exclusion in 'Michael' of readers, who are also necessarily observers, is not total, for Michael's way of life, I shall argue, has a symbolic function. Empathy with the rural characters in Wordsworth's poetry is rarely a possibility and only the most attenuated kinds of social relationship are prefigured. What 'Michael' is directed towards conveying instead is a quality of life, a distillation of character, a 'passion' which is capable of bridging the gulf separating the observing reader from the action of the poem and which bears as much relation to Michael the individual as does the image of the leech-gatherer 'wandering about alone and silently' ('Resolution and Independence', 130) to the actual leech-gatherer who remains mysterious. By the complementary guidance of Nature and Poetry we may be led to feel for 'passions' not our own. We noticed this emphasis on 'passions' in relation to 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill'. It continued into the second edition of *Lyrical Ballads* in which 'Michael' was published; in the Preface Wordsworth referred to a

. circumstance which distinguishes these Poems from the popular Poetry of the day; it is this, that the feeling therein developed gives importance to the action and situation and not the action and situation to the feeling.⁶²

'Michael', it is true, is 'unenriched with strange events' (19) and yet it also lacks the sudden and climactic evocation of feeling which, in poems such as 'Goody Blake', transforms our perception of the incidents related. As far as 'Michael' is concerned, it is necessary to complete Wordsworth's statement in the Preface with a coda - the action and situation give rise to the feeling which, in turn, lends significance to

60. *The Dark Side of the Landscape*, p. 157.

61. Owen and Smyser, III, p. 80.

62. *Ibid.*, I, p. 128.

the action and situation; it is the process which is important, the bonding of feeling to action and situation, and not the feeling in itself.

It may seem far-fetched to see in the lack of 'extraordinary incident',⁶³ in 'Michael' a similarity with Homer. Yet the effect of an absence of incident is strangely congruous to the effect of the superfluity of incident which characterizes the epic. Erich Auerbach has suggested that the Homeric epic is distinguished by a lack of suspense; events take place in a leisurely fashion and in a perpetual foreground, creating the 'illusion of an unchanging, basically stable order in comparison with which the succession of individuals and changes in personal fortune appear unimportant'.⁶⁴ Many of the verse paragraphs in 'Michael' similarly fail to rise to any climax but end with inconsequential description which, because the emphasis of ending is apparently ignored, tempts bathos. Take this ending, for example -

Yet when the meal
Was ended, Luke (for so the Son was named)
And his old Father both betook themselves
To such convenient work as might employ
Their hands by the fire-side; perhaps to card
Wool for the Housewife's spindle, or repair
Some injury done to sickle, flail, or scythe,
Or other implement of house or field.

(102-109)

Except for some compression in the last two lines the syntax is that of prose. Nevertheless, we could not prose the passage without changing its nature entirely. In poems such as 'Goody Blake' and 'Simon Lee' Wordsworth compels us to question our expectations by leading to a climax which does not satisfy them. Here he evades the demands of the verse by not leading to a climax at all. This alone gives the passage a significance that a similar passage of prose, in which the pressure of the verse-form did not operate, would lack. Wordsworth continues past the natural conclusion, the ending of the meal, and concludes instead with images of perseverance and repair. The passage, in its minute way, contributes to a motif which justifies the dignity of the blank verse - the refusal to acknowledge the demands of ending.

63. Id.

64. Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, translated by Willard R. Trask (Princeton, 1953), p. 28.

'Michael' is a domestication of the epic. It places a similar stress on continuity but without the lofty and awesome perspective that reduces individual lives to an undistinguishable succession and makes extraordinary actions seem ordinary. There is, of course, nothing extraordinary in the mere fact of a daily domestic routine. But there is perhaps something unusual in the perfect way in which the smallest details of this routine reflect the quality of the lives which Michael and his family lead, making them 'as a proverb in the vale / For *endless* industry' (94-95) (my italics). Whereas in Homer the only constant is the fact of continuity, the symbolical level of 'Michael' is more human; we cannot extract a proverb or symbol from any detail in the poem without at the same time referring to every other detail (such is the degree of correspondence) and thus commemorating these particular lives in this particular place. The old lamp, for instance, is not 'a public symbol of the life / That thrifty Pair had lived' (130-131) only because of some abstract quality that it shares with them. The lamp as a symbol may have been intended to suggest that ageing need not be a decline if it is accompanied by a constant and regular devotion to the duties of thrift and industry. It is true that Wordsworth's description of the lamp makes it clear that he meant it to have this moral function -

An aged utensil, which had performed
Service beyond all others of its kind.
Early at evening did it burn - and late,
Surviving comrade of uncounted hours...

(115-118)

Like Michael and Isabel, the lamp survives by continuing to perform its service. Yet 'Michael' cannot be summarized as a lesson. The lamp's less obvious but more important purpose is to perform the function of memory, like the hills of Grasmere and the poem itself. It is a link with the past, a reminder of those 'objects' and 'hopes' (121) which, as Wordsworth suggested in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar' and as he reiterates here, are the stuff of life. As a symbol of hope cementing the community, linking old and young, and postponing thoughts of the end, the lamp is like the planet of love shining at night (139).

The image of father and son working by the light of the lamp ('There by the light of this old lamp they sate, / Father and Son', 124-125) has a significance beyond the conventional association of familial devotion and devotion to industry. Just as the lamp has passed its normal life-span,

a fact which not only testifies to its sturdiness but also draws attention to the imminence of its end, so the relationship between Michael and the 'son of his old age' (143), over which it presides, is both a promise of continuity and a reminder of death. The theme to which the poem addresses itself with such relentless comprehensiveness is how 'the pleasure which there is in life itself' (77), the bond of family and place which holds the individual to his past, survives the expectation of death. Michael's son performs for him the service that freedom does for the Cumberland beggar; the tension between Mind and Nature, the anxiety of hope, is kept alive and Nature's inevitable victory postponed -

a child, more than all other gifts
That earth can offer to a declining man,
Brings hope with it, and forward-looking thoughts,
And stirrings of inquietude, when they
By tendency of nature needs must fail.
(146-150)

The nature of the lamp as a symbol may be further elucidated, in a way that bears, I think, on the ending of the poem, by looking at a passage omitted after the edition of 1802 -

Not with a waste of words, but for the sake
Of pleasure, which I know that I shall give
To many living now, I of this Lamp
Speak thus minutely: for there are no few
Whose memories will bear witness to my tale.

De Selincourt included in his notes to 'Michael' similar manuscript passages which were never incorporated in the poem. For example -

I will relate
One incident, and then will close a strain
Which I have lengthened out as if I thought
That all my hearers had one heart, and loved
Such matter as I love it.

It is clear that such affection could not be aroused by symbols with a merely didactic purpose. The details of the tale, such as the lamp, are bonds with the past which are intended to reach deep into the reader's own past. It is equally clear why such passages were omitted. They tend to make the poem a superficial adjunct to memory. They echo an uncertainty still present in the introduction as to how far the poem is open to those readers who do not share the poet's experience and therefore cannot readily participate in his memories. 'Michael' is curiously close in this respect to Auden's 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' -

Now he is scattered among a hundred cities
 And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections...
 The words of a dead man
 Are modified in the guts of the living.

(I, 18-19, 22-23)⁶⁵

Though Wordsworth's tentativeness is, in its honesty, far from Auden's ambivalent tone, which hovers on the brink of a sophisticated cynicism too easily satisfied with paradox, a similar doubt about poetry qualifies a similar commitment to it and issues in a similar concern for and anxiety about the possible fruits of perseverance in the face of death.

Follow, poet, follow right
 To the bottom of the night,
 With your unconstraining voice
 Still persuade us to rejoice...

(III, 13-16)

Wordsworth emphasizes this aspect of the poem in a letter to Charles Fox but in a way that tends to accommodate the poem to conventional expectations; he hopes that 'The Brothers' and 'Michael'

may excite profitable sympathies in many kind and good hearts, and may in some small degree enlarge our feelings of reverence for our species, and our knowledge of human nature, by shewing that our best qualities are possessed by men whom we are too apt to consider, not with reference to the points in which they resemble us, but to those in which they manifestly differ from us.⁶⁶

This amounts to little more than a plea for recognition that 'men who do not wear fine cloaths can feel deeply'.⁶⁷ Of course, such a claim, which may seem obvious now, was less evident at a time when a leading authority on agriculture could write as follows -

In my way from Royston to Baldock, passing a village, I saw a couple of cottages which seemed very miserable. Alighted therefore and entered one. The woman said she was very unhappy. I enquired why? Her daughter was now dead in the house. How old? Thirty-eight. Married to a glazier in London. She had been down with her mother some time for health in a decline, and died two days ago. 'I hope she died a good Christian.'. 'I hope so', replied the woman, who seemed to feel very little. And it is the blessing of God that they do not - they cannot afford to grieve like

65. W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, edited by Edward Mendelson (London, 1976), p. 197. All quotations from 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats' are from this edition.

66. Letter to Charles Fox, 14 Janury, 1801; *Early Years*, p. 315.

67. Id.

their betters. It was odd that I should happen to stop and enter a cottage with a corpse in it, but nothing interesting followed.⁶⁸

We have already discovered this attitude, that the poor are endowed with a cruder sensibility which enables them to cope with their deprivations, in Cowper's *The Task* and it was quite commonplace even at the end of the eighteenth century. However, although Wordsworth's claim in his letter to Fox seems to challenge such an attitude, it actually invites condescension. As we noted with respect to Burns, the belief that the poor might overcome the disadvantages of their poverty so as to acquire a sensibility comparable to their betters was at this time achieving fairly wide acceptance. This is the extent of Wordsworth's claim in his letter. He does not there attempt to argue that the poor in response to their poverty develop qualities which differ from those of the rich and from which the rich might derive some benefit. This would have been much less acceptable. As Jeffrey wrote in his review of *Thalaba* -

The poor and vulgar may interest us, in poetry, by their *situation*: but never, we apprehend, by any sentiments that are peculiar to their condition...⁶⁹

It would not be wise to place too much emphasis on Wordsworth's letter to Fox, which is, after all, an appeal for patronage, as evidence of his intentions in 'Michael'. Nevertheless, the letter is concerned with the preservation of the independence of the poor against the threat of expanding industry, a tradition of thought which we have seen was well represented in poetry, and some critics have felt that Wordsworth's dependence on this tradition damaged 'Michael'. John Jones, for example, describes Wordsworth's reference to 'the dissolute city' (444) as 'typical of Wordsworth's use of the city as a pasteboard symbol of vice and artifice'.⁷⁰ Poets such as Goldsmith and Cowper also used the city to symbolize all that seemed to be destructive of the rural way of life.

68. *The Autobiography of Arthur Young*, edited by M. Betham-Edwards (London, 1898), pp. 330-331.

69. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 1 (October, 1802), 63-83; Madden, p. 72.

70. John Jones, *The Egotistical Sublime: A History of Wordsworth's Imagination* (London, 1954), p. 100.

Against the natural bonds of family and place, the 'bonds of domestic feeling among the poor', as Wordsworth described them in the letter to Fox,⁷¹ Wordsworth, like Goldsmith and Cowper, sets the bonds of trade which threaten to disrupt them, in this case the bond of surety which Michael pledged on behalf of his nephew (209-217). However, it has not been noticed that Wordsworth describes the city in Michael's own language -

at length,
He in the dissolute city gave himself
To evil courses...

(443-445)

Michael, for example, speaks of his nephew as follows -

An evil man
That was, and made an evil choice, if he
Were false to us...

(236-238)

He prepares Luke for the city with these words -

amid all fear
And all temptation, Luke, I pray that thou
May'st bear in mind the life thy Fathers lived,
Who, being innocent, did for that cause
Bestir them in good deeds.

(408-412)

The moral certainty which allows Michael to designate certain actions without hesitation as evil and certain others as good is simple but, like certain passages in *The Shepherd's Week*, it invites dismissal too nakedly. The poem is an attempt to discover what will suffice and though we may condescend to Michael's certainty, we cannot condescend to the suffering which it causes nor to the strength which Michael derives from it, enabling him to endure his suffering. What we are finally brought to recognize is not inferiority but difference ('passions not our own'), a recognition which is too difficult to be alluded to in a letter to a potential patron and which in itself creates a mean between absolute difference and absolute conformity.

'Michael' is 'unconstraining', in Auden's sense of the word, not only because of Wordsworth's hesitations about his readers but also because although its main characters have all the virtuous qualities, their rewards are not obvious. Michael's hope for the future, expressed in his love

71. Letter to Charles Fox, 14 January, 1801; *Early Years*, p. 313.

for his son and embodied in his work on the sheepfold, is disappointed. The enormity of this disappointment may be measured by the displacement which it causes in the verse -

There is a comfort in the strength of love;
'Twill make a thing endurable, which else
Would upset the brain, or break the heart...
(448-450)

We may agree with Geoffrey Hartman when he writes -

We feel, of course, how close to heartbreak the old man comes; we feel it in the absolute tact with which the poet begins to describe him after the disaster, when Wordsworth is like one who may not come near the quick of grief, and approaches his subject by generalization and indirection...⁷²

Perhaps, though, there is a further reason for Wordsworth's 'indirection', for is he not guiding and reassuring the reader in this passage as much as suggesting Michael's reaction? Michael gradually fades out of focus towards the end of the poem, as the narrator turns to the memories of neighbours; the remains of the sheepfold return to the centre of attention. Perhaps there is in this withdrawal something which is more than tact and which is not what Leavis interpreted as an opportunistic attempt to merge the human suffering with 'a reconciling grandeur' in the mountain background.⁷³ Just as Michael persevered beyond his real death, the severing of the bonds which gave his life significance, so his 'passion' may continue in the hearts of readers, fed by the evidence of it that remains, the unfinished sheepfold, and the tale that attends to it.

In a beautiful passage from MS.1 of 'Michael' that was unfortunately never incorporated into the poem Wordsworth recorded that, for himself, such traces of human endeavour kept at bay the pressure of Nature to reduce human beings to insignificance -

For me,
When it has chanced that having wandered long
Among the mountains, I have waked at last
From dream of motion in some spot like this,

72. *Wordsworth's Poetry 1787-1814*, p. 265.

73. F.R. Leavis, *Revaluation: Tradition and Development in English Poetry* (London, 1936), p. 181.

Shut out from man, some region - one of those
 That hold by an inalienable right
 An independent Life, and seem the whole
 Of nature and of unrecorded time;
 If, looking round, I have perchance perceived
 Some vestiges of human hands, some stir
 Of human passion, they to me are sweet
 As lightest sunbreak, or the sudden sound
 Of music to a blind man's ear who sits
 Alone and silent in the summer shade.
 They are as a creation in my heart...

When it is alerted to the surviving evidence of an individual life, a particular continuity that has not merged with the epic continuity of 'the whole / Of nature and of unrecorded time', the imagination awakens. What is especially touching about this passage is the manner, characteristic of the poem itself, in which it keeps sight of the ordinary life from which the extraordinary experience emerges. There is a modest uncertainty in the introduction ('For me'), a hesitation about the wider significance of this private event, also indicative of the beginning of the poem proper. At the same time, in the lack of pretentiousness which allows the casual phrase 'looking around' to remain in this special context, there is some assurance that the kind of experience described does not separate the poet from ordinary people; art ('music to a blind man's ear') is also evidence of 'human passion'.

With typical humility Wordsworth detaches art (music) from the artist (the blind man) and implies that its highest aim is the universality and permanence of a natural property like sunlight. Wordsworth rarely sees himself as a seer possessed of dangerous knowledge, the image of the poet in 'Kubla Khan'. He is not only like a blind man but 'alone and silent' and his only interaction with the external world comes by chance. Both Coleridge and Wordsworth describe poets helplessly inspired but whereas the inspiration in Coleridge's poem lifts the poet above the level of ordinary people, in Wordsworth's case it breaks into a lonely separateness, linking the poet with 'human passion' and creating a tentative sense of communion which might be illusory ('They are *as* a creation in my heart', my italics). Wordsworth's poet is like the blind beggar in Book VII of *The Prelude* who embodies the limits of the isolating quest for knowledge and he is also like the traveller admonished by the beggar and 'turned round' (VII, 643), returned to what he had earlier described, scornfully, as 'That huge fermenting mass of human-kind'

(VII, 621). He is, in other words, an unresolved amalgam, seeking or begging, separating or merging, above or below but never quite at one with the human mass, and his importance lies not in seeing, in discovering, but in striving. Wordsworth's poetry is like the beggar's label, a history of suffering intended to be 'an apt type', permanent and universal, 'of the utmost we can know' (VII, 644-645) and designed to turn readers round towards reconciliation with their own humanness.⁷⁴ I hope that I am not forcing a comparison with the other poems discussed if I suggest that when Wordsworth refers in 'Michael' to 'the strength of love' (448), he does not mean a capacity for becoming involved with suffering, the capacity which Harry Gill manifested on one disastrous occasion, but an ability to turn to what remains, a 'turning round', a refusal, in other words, to acknowledge the demands of ending. Michael's strength, which enabled him to steer between the Scylla of total isolation and the Charybdis of levelling nature, may become the strength of a community. By contrast, Harry Gill, lacking 'the strength of love', is disgorged by Scylla only to disappear into Charybdis.

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74. For a different and fascinating comparison between Wordsworth as poet and the blind beggar, see Stephen Prickett, *Coleridge and Wordsworth: The Poetry of Growth* (Cambridge, 1970), pp. 87-89. In the 'blind beggar' passage, Prickett argues, 'dereliction and dejection become the spring-head of joy and new growth' (p. 88). This interpretation needs to be read in the light of the 'very radical ambiguity between loss and gain' (p. 128) which Prickett discovers in poems with a similar polarity of dejection and joy, such as 'A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal' and 'Intimations of Immortality'. He concludes -

Mental growth, as [Wordsworth] experienced it, was both ambiguous and inconsistent. To see it as a gain immediately involved him in an assertion of what he remembers he has lost; to see it as a loss cannot be done without recognizing his present ability to recall and evaluate what he has lost with far deeper understanding than a child.

(pp. 134-135)

In other words, 'growth can *only* develop from the failure of existing schemata' (p. 146). While agreeing with this argument, I would place the emphasis differently, for I would apply Prickett's interpretation of 'Resolution and Independence' - 'The message now is one of struggle, not of understanding' (p. 166) - to more of Wordsworth's poetry than he does and would disagree with his conclusion that the poem is 'a logical continuation of [Wordsworth's] attempt to build a poetic structure that would tame and didacticize nature without correspondingly modifying the creating mind of the poet' (p. 167). Wordsworth's 'struggle', in this poem and elsewhere, it seems to me, is to relinquish the wilful attitude to nature that Prickett describes here.

'Michael' is about continuity. Yet many critics shared Wordsworth's doubts concerning its possibility. One of the major grounds of contemporary criticism was that Wordsworth neglected familiar literary conventions in favour of private associations unintelligible to the common reader. He upset, it was thought, accepted proprieties, linking the grand and the trivial, the comic and the spiritual, in language and thought. John Herman Merivale, for example, wrote in a review of *The Excursion* -

It is in the very excess of these feelings, and in the unbounded indulgence of them to the utter exclusion of that intercourse with society, - that habitual collision with the sentiments and the opinions of the age, - which is absolutely requisite to keep an enthusiastic mind within the confines of sound and temperate judgment, that a very large proportion of the author's errors and excentricities may perhaps be found.⁷⁵

William Rowe Lyall wrote similarly in a review of *Poems* (1815) and *The White Doe of Rylstone* -

[T]he merit of a poet does not essentially consist, as is sometimes supposed, in the possession of sensibilities different from or more intense than those of other people, but in the talent of awakening in their minds the particular feelings and emotions with which the various objects of his art are naturally associated. For this purpose he must, of course, consult his own feelings; it is, however, only so far as he knows them to be in unison with those of mankind at large, that he can safely trust himself to their direction; because, if they preserve not the same relative subordination and the same proportions among each other that they possess in the minds of people in general, it is plain that his compositions must appear to the greater part of his readers like pictures constructed upon false principles of perspective...⁷⁶

Earlier reviews tended to be less temperate in their criticism. The reviewer of *Poems* (1807) in *The Satirist*, for example, wrote -

Almost a ludicrous contrast is produced between the swelling self-sufficiency of the writer, and the extreme insignificance of the object described... [W]e may observe generally, that the uninteresting nature of all the appearances he dwells upon, proves the interest which he attaches to himself and his own character.⁷⁷

75. John Herman Merivale, *Monthly Review*, second series, 76 (February, 1815), 123-136; Reiman, II, p. 731.

76. William Rowe Lyall, *Quarterly Review*, 14 (October, 1815), 201-225; *ibid.*, p. 836.

77. Unsigned review, *Satirist*, 1 (November, 1807), 188-191; *ibid.*, p. 846.

Similar opinions are expressed in many other reviews.⁷⁸ I have quoted at length in order to demonstrate that Jeffrey's literary conservatism was widely shared and that his sustained opposition to Wordsworth's poetry does not deserve to be attributed to malice or caprice. Though Jeffrey's criticism had a tendency towards the sensational, its principles were, on the whole, ably and consistently enunciated. In his review of *Poems* (1807) he accused Wordsworth of

connecting his most lofty, tender, or impassioned conceptions, with objects and incidents, which the greater part of his readers will probably persist in thinking low, silly, or uninteresting. Whether this is done from affectation and conceit alone, or whether it may not arise, in some measure, from the self-illusion of a mind of extraordinary sensibility, habituated to solitary meditation, we cannot undertake to determine.⁷⁹

Jeffrey has attracted much criticism for privately expressing an affection for the *Lyrical Ballads* and publicly castigating them, an apparent hypocrisy that was notorious to his contemporaries. Coleridge, for instance, wrote indignantly to Daniel Stuart -

I give you my honor, that Jeffray himself told me, that *he* was himself an enthusiastic Admirer of Wordsworth's Poetry...⁸⁰

Yet, as John Clive has pointed out, Jeffrey's critical principles allowed even for this.⁸¹ In his review of *The Excursion* he wrote as follows -

An habitual and general knowledge of the few settled and permanent maxims, which form the canon of general taste in all large and polished societies - a certain tact, which informs us at once that many things, which we still love and are moved by in secret, must necessarily be despised as childish, or derided as absurd, in all such societies - though it will not stand in the place of genius, seems necessary to the success of its exertions...⁸²

78. See, for example, Josiah Conder, *Eclectic Review*, second series, 5 (January, 1816), 33-45; *ibid.*, I, p. 368; unsigned review, *British Critic*, second series, 11 (June, 1819), 584-603; *ibid.*, pp. 167-170; unsigned review, *Monthly Censor*, 2 (March, 1823), 324-335; *ibid.*, II, p. 656.

79. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 11 (October, 1807), 214-231; Reiman, II, p. 431.

80. Letter to Daniel Stuart, (8?) July, 1825; Griggs, V (1971), p. 475.

81. John Clive, *Scotch Reviewers: 'The Edinburgh Review', 1802-1815* (London, 1957), pp. 158-165. See also Marilyn Butler, *Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries: English Literature and its Background 1760-1830* (Oxford, 1981), pp. 61-62.

82. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 24 (November, 1814), 1-30; Reiman, II, p. 440.

In other words, as we noted in the first chapter, private tastes are nugatory if they conflict with the consensus of decorum by which literary and social conventions are linked.

Wordsworth was himself concerned that his personal associations might be merely private idiosyncrasies, an anxiety expressed, as we have seen, in 'Michael'. He further anticipated such criticism in the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1800) -

I am sensible that my associations must have sometimes been particular instead of general, and that, consequently, giving to things a false importance, sometimes from diseased impulses I may have written upon unworthy subjects...⁸³

However, Wordsworth set against the 'permanent maxims of society' an authority equally portentous and equally vague, the permanent laws of nature. It is difficult to be more specific about Wordsworth's meaning in the Preface when he refers to 'the primary laws of our nature'⁸⁴ and 'the beautiful and permanent forms of nature',⁸⁵ for (unlike Jeffrey when he refers to 'the law of nature')⁸⁶ he is more concerned to distinguish them from the custom of urban society and its conventional associations than to elaborate on their specificity. Wordsworth sought to replace the 'formal engagement' of poetic decorum and its promise to 'gratify certain known habits of association',⁸⁷ with poetry which encourage new 'habits of mind' based on 'feelings connected with important subjects'.⁸⁸ His criticisms of convention are more convincing than the alternatives he proposed, an imbalance apparent in his letter to John Wilson, in which he points out acutely -

People in our rank in life are perpetually falling into one sad mistake, namely, that of supposing that human nature and the persons they associate with are one and the same thing.⁸⁹

83. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 152.

84. Ibid., p. 122.

85. Ibid., p. 124.

86. See pp. 45-46.

87. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 122.

88. Ibid., p. 126.

89. Letter to John Wilson, 7 June, 1802; *Early Years*, p. 355.

From this he lamely concludes that the great poet should attempt to expose the limitations of the sophisticated literary milieu by rendering the feelings of his readers 'more consonant to nature, that is, to eternal nature, and the great moving spirit of things'.⁹⁰

In Wordsworth's poetry the Augustan balancing of 'is' and 'ought' has become almost impossible. What is tends to be merely what is conventional and what ought to be is largely mysterious, described in superlatives of permanence, eternity and universality which only serve to demonstrate its inaccessibility to reason. Moreover, unlike the moral philosophers, Wordsworth does not attempt to bolster reason by means of some consensus of opinion. In a manuscript fragment of an essay on morals he dismisses moral philosophy because it lacks 'sufficient power to melt into our affections, to incorporate itself with the blood & vital juices of our minds, & thence to have any influence worth our notice in forming those habits' which are the basis of moral actions.⁹¹ Wordsworth's moral scepticism was more extreme than Hume's because he did not accept that the collective attitudes of the middle classes were a more important determinant of vice and virtue than the individual workings of sympathy. 'It is not enough for me as a Poet', he wrote to Wilson, to delineate merely such feelings as all men *do* sympathize with but, it is also highly desirable to add to these others, such as all men *may* sympathize with, and such as there is reason to believe they would be better and more moral beings if they did sympathize with.⁹²

Wordsworth acknowledged Jeffrey's critical position as the norm and set himself in opposition to it -

I have one request to make of my Reader, which is, that in judging these Poems he would decide by his own feelings genuinely, and not by reflection upon what will probably be the judgment of others. How common is it to hear a person say, "I myself do not object to this style of composition or this or that expression, but to such and such classes of people it will appear mean or ludicrous." This mode of criticism so destructive of all sound and unadulterated

90. Id.

91. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 103.

92. Letter to John Wilson, 7 June, 1802; *Early Years*, p. 358.

judgment is almost universal: I have therefore to request that the Reader would abide, independently by his own feelings, and that if he finds himself affected he would not suffer such conjectures to interfere with his pleasure.⁹³

It is therefore misleading to suggest, as M.H. Abrams does,⁹⁴ that Wordsworth's preoccupation with vagrants and leech-gatherers is perfectly compatible with neoclassical thought in that he is concerned with the universality of human nature; 'uniformitarianism' always implied belief in a more or less common response to literature. It is true that Wordsworth retained an ideal of universality but only by replacing the socially unifying and static 'human nature' of neoclassicism with a concept of 'human nature' devoid of the neoclassical social context so that its integral terms, 'human' and 'nature', might approach, as far as possible, a dynamic and unmediated interaction. The most distinctive feature of Wordsworth's rural characters is their unfamiliarity, their isolation from the normal milieu of the average reader, the source of conventional poetry. They exist on the margins of the community and their very humanity is often in question. When Wordsworth writes in the Preface of the 'elementary feelings' of 'low and rustic life', he is less concerned to indicate a shared humanity than to suggest that in that condition only those feelings least 'under the action of social vanity' survive.⁹⁵ Wordsworth's purpose in his poetry is not to provide a record of rural poverty in order to demonstrate its similarity with urban sophistication but to imitate the caustic effect of poverty in order to cleanse from the basic or 'elementary' sense of community the encrustations of social status.

It is also possible that Wordsworth's decision to derive his poetic language from 'low and rustic life',⁹⁶ was more propaedeutic than strictly mimetic in intention. Wordsworth's lack of concern for the particularities of individual feeling, an indifference which seems at odds with his moral

93. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 154.

94. *The Mirror and the Lamp*, pp. 103-107.

95. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 124.

96. Id.

scepticism, reveals, I believe, his real interest to be the universal sympathy of passion, a uniformity as precarious and open as Jeffrey's conformity is stable, assured and exclusive. By analogy, he was perhaps less concerned to imitate the nuances of rustic conversation than to challenge the commonly accepted model of the polite conversation of gentlemen in order to make possible a less partial language. If it is true that Wordsworth opposed the moral consensus of decorum with recommendations of difference so as to prepare for a uniformity based on individually felt experience rather than norms of behaviour, it may also be true that his preoccupation with a simple poetic language is less a prescription than an attempt to make classifications of style less specialized and more inclusive and democratic. Perhaps, moreover, Wordsworth's experiments with a universal language incorporate as many doubts as his attempts to intimate a universal sympathy.

It is necessary to be so tentative because most critics, both contemporary and modern, of Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction have assumed, not without some encouragement from Wordsworth himself, that he intended to create a poetic version of actual rustic speech.⁹⁷ From the outset this was the dominant interpretation of that part of the Advertisement to *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) which declared that the majority of the poems 'were written chiefly with a view to ascertain how far the language of conversation in the middle and lower classes of society is adapted to the purposes of poetic pleasure'.⁹⁸ It was thought that Wordsworth was attempting to replace an acceptable social analogue for poetic style with its antithesis -

The language of *conversation*, and that too of the *lower classes*, can never be considered as the language of *poetry*...

We may distinguish a *simple* style from a style of *simplicity*. By a simple style we may suppose a colloquial diction, debased by inelegance, and gross by familiarity. Simplicity is a manner of expression, facile, pure, and always elegant...

97. For representative examples of modern opinion, see James W. Heffernan, *Wordsworth's Theory of Poetry: The Transforming Imagination* (Ithaca, New York and London, 1969), pp. 38-49; W.J.B. Owen, *Wordsworth as Critic* (London, 1969), pp. 37, 67-68.

98. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 116.

The simple style has all the squalid nakedness of a BEGGAR, and simplicity, the lovely nudity of a GRACE.⁹⁹

Other reviewers similarly inferred from *Lyrical Ballads* an intention to introduce into poetry a new and specialized genre modelled on the lower rather than the higher classes. Dr Burney described the poems as 'rustic delineations of low-life' and compared their style, as Crabbe's style was compared, to Teniers.¹⁰⁰ Francis Jeffrey complained that

the new poets are just as great borrowers as the old; only that, instead of borrowing from the more popular passages of their illustrious predecessors, they have preferred furnishing themselves from vulgar ballads and plebeian nurseries.¹⁰¹

Most criticism was directed at the connection which Wordsworth made between his poetic language and 'low and rustic life'. In so far as his poetry was seen primarily as an attempt to correct the extravagances of eighteenth-century poetic diction by means of 'a selection of language really used by men',¹⁰² it was relatively uncontroversial. This aspect of his theory would have been fairly familiar to his readers. His choice of 'our elder writers' as models¹⁰³ and his praise of the language of Chaucer for being 'universally intelligible'¹⁰⁴ would have recalled Addison's essays on *Chevy Chase* and in particular his claim that the ballad 'hit the Taste of so many Ages' and 'pleased the Readers of all Ranks and Conditions'.¹⁰⁵ In the later eighteenth century simplicity was a common style for magazine poetry and a common butt of magazine critics.¹⁰⁶

99. Unsigned review, *New London Review*, 1 (January, 1799), 33-35; Reiman, II, pp. 792-793.

100. Charles Burney, *Monthly Review*, second series, 29 (June, 1799), 202-210; *ibid.*, p. 713.

101. Francis Jeffrey, *Edinburgh Review*, 11 (October, 1807), 214-231; *ibid.*, p. 431.

102. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 137.

103. *Ibid.*, p. 116.

104. *Ibid.*, p. 124.

105. *The Spectator*, no. 74 (25 May, 1711); Bond, I, p. 321.

106. See, for example, the unsigned review of William Mason, *The English Garden*, Book the First, *Gentleman's Magazine*, 42 (February, 1772), 78-80, p. 78; 'A Letter on Simplicity of Style and Composition', *London Magazine*, 51 (October, 1782), 463-467.

One reviewer of Bishop Percy's *The Hermit of Warkworth* (1771) complained that 'for some time there has prevailed a fashionable but false taste of imitating the vernacular simplicity of the old ballad-poets'.¹⁰⁷

According to John Aikin, 'a real or affected taste for beautiful simplicity has almost universally prevailed' since 'the times of Swift and Prior'.¹⁰⁸ Simplicity, moreover, was customarily seen as a means of associating the stylistic opposition of nature versus art with the thematic opposition of country versus city. Collins, for example, in his 'Ode to Simplicity' personified simplicity as 'a decent maid' (10) who 'Disdain'st the wealth of art' (8).¹⁰⁹ Matilda Betham, a friend of Lamb, Coleridge and Southey, characterized simplicity as a 'Fair village nymph' (1) in 'To Simplicity', written in November, 1795 -

Still rob'd in innocence and ease,
Daughter of Truth, shall thou prevail,
When Affectation cannot please,
And all the spells of Fashion fail.
(33-36)¹¹⁰

It was this association of simplicity with Truth, as opposed to Affectation, that proved instrumental in determining the nature of the critical response to Wordsworth's theory of poetic diction. In discussions of simplicity the compatibility of the mimetic and affectivist tendencies in eighteenth-century criticism is strikingly manifested.¹¹¹ Simplicity was thought to be a true imitation of sincere and universal

107. Unsigned review, *Monthly Review*, 45 (August, 1771), 96-103, p. 96. The reviewer of *Lyrical Ballads* (1798) for the *New London Review*, from whom I quoted earlier, seems to have been aware of this review; compare, for example -

We have observed that *simplicity*, though naked, is not poor: we may add, her nakedness is that of a grace, not that of a beggar.
(p. 96)

108. *Essays on Song-Writing*, p. 29.

109. *The Poems of Thomas Gray, William Collins, Oliver Goldsmith*, edited by Roger Lonsdale, p. 424.

110. Matilda Betham, *Elegies and Other Small Poems* (Ipswich, [1797]), pp. 57, 59.

111. For a history of the idea of simplicity, see Raymond D. Havens, 'Simplicity, A Changing Concept', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 14, 1 (January, 1953), 3-32.

passion modelled on the language of nature. For example, John Aikin, in *Essays on Song-Writing* (1772), argued -

In general whatever is designed to move the passions cannot be too natural and simple. It is also evident that when the professed design of the poet is to paint the beauties of nature and the rural landscape of pastoral life, he must give as great an air of reality as possible to his piece, since an ill imitation necessarily produces disgust.¹¹²

Aikin also finds a model of simplicity in popular ballads -

Their language is the language of nature, simple and unadorned; their story is not the wild offspring of fancy, but the probable adventure of the cottage; and their sentiments are the unstudied expressions of passions and emotions common to all mankind.¹¹³

Similarly James Beattie insisted that 'if Poetry be imitative of Nature..., the *language of Poetry* must be an imitation of the *language of Nature*', which he defined as 'that use of speech, or of *artificial language*, which is suitable to the speaker and to the occasion'.¹¹⁴ Implicit in these statements is a concept similar to Jeffrey's 'law of nature', according to which the emotional response of readers to dramatically or descriptively convincing semblances of real people or situations is uniform. It is fancy which, by contrast, delights in difference and novelty by deviating from the familiar and concentrating on the distinctive.

It is this antithesis between emotion and fancy that informs William Rowe Lyall's review of *The White Doe of Rylstone*, in which he argues that the effect of 'that peculiar sort of diction technically called *poetical*'

is to fix the imagination rather upon the real or fanciful analogies which objects may seem to possess among one another than upon the particular relations in which they actually stand to us. In those subjects in which Pope and Dryden chiefly excelled, where the poet addresses himself to the fancy or understanding rather than to the heart, we know not but that the method of versification to which we are alluding, may produce a good effect... But when the business of the poet is to present us with an image of the scenes and objects among which we are placed, not in abstract description, but as they relate immediately to our feelings, his expressions cannot, as we conceive, be too free from rhetorical ornament.¹¹⁵

112. *Essays on Song-Writing*, pp. 7-8.

113. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

114. *Essays*, pp. 207, 209.

115. William Rowe Lyall, *Quarterly Review*, 14 (October, 1815), 201-225; Reiman, II, p. 835.

Francis Jeffrey also distinguishes between an artificial style, which modifies nature and so 'reflects the image of a poetical mind', and a natural style, which he describes as 'a mere transparent medium of the thoughts, neither degrading nor setting them off by any adventitious qualities of its own, but leaving them to make their own impression, by the force of truth and nature'.¹¹⁶ Coleridge outlined a more radical version of Jeffrey's distinction in a letter to William Wilberforce written for Wordsworth and intended to accompany a copy of *Lyrical Ballads*. He suggested that the poetry of 'Wit' and 'outrageous incident' appealed, to use Jeffrey's words, to 'adventitious qualities' of social status while the style of 'our elder Poets' was a more 'transparent' and therefore more democratic medium -

It was the excellence of our elder Poets to write in such a language as should the *most* rapidly convey their mean[ing,] but the pleasure which I am persuaded the greater number of Read[ers re]ceive from our modern writers in verse & prose, arises from the sense of having overcome a difficulty, of having made a series of lucky guesses, & perhaps, in some degree, of understanding what they are conscious the lower Classes of their Countrymen would not be able to understand.¹¹⁷

This is not substantially different from Hugh Blair's description of simplicity -

A writer of Simplicity expresses himself in such a manner, that every one thinks he could have written in the same way... There are no marks of art in his expression; it seems the very language of nature; you see in the Style, not the writer and his labour, but the man, in his own natural character.¹¹⁸

Nor is it substantially different from Wordsworth's castigation of the artificial poet who 'will break in upon the sanctity and truth of his pictures by transitory and accidental ornaments, and endeavour to excite admiration of himself'.¹¹⁹ In all three cases, the poetic style with which

116. Francis Jeffrey, review of Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria* (1817), *Edinburgh Review*, 28 (August, 1817), 488-515; Reiman, II, pp. 494-495.

117. Griggs, II (1956), p. 666.

118. Blair, I, p. 390.

119. Owen and Smyser, I, pp. 141-142.

the universal intelligibility and verisimilitude of simplicity is contrasted is that which draws attention to its own artfulness.

It was because Wordsworth seemed to belong to the mimetic tradition of simplicity that his recommendation of rustic language seemed such an inexplicable deviation. The language of nature was supposed to be familiar enough to be unostentatious without being so familiar as to be mundane. Such familiarity was to be achieved in poetry by refining the average reader's informal speech; simplicity was characterized by Blair as the conversation of 'a person of distinction at home'.¹²⁰ The more poetic diction approached such conversation while still remaining poetry, the less attention it would draw to itself and hence the more natural it would seem. Thus simplicity was to be attained, according to Aikin, 'rather by dropping all ornament and glitter, than by putting on an affected rusticity'.¹²¹ Descriptive accuracy or dramatic propriety could not extend to an imitation of rustic speech without contravening the norm of familiarity. As James Beattie warned -

Writers on pastoral have not always been careful to distinguish between coarseness and simplicity; and yet a plain suit of cloaths and a bundle of rags are not more different.¹²²

By these standards Wordsworth's attempt at the familiar style was an obvious failure because his use of language was so noticeable as to be the subject of numerous parodies.¹²³ It is appropriate that his putative defender in *The Simpliciad* (1808) should be so easily overwhelmed -

F. Yet Nature and Simplicity belong -
P. True, to the mighty arbiters of song,
To painters, sculptors, all who claim a part
In the rich heritage of mimic art...
F. Simplicity.

P. Yes, not with rags defil'd,
A stamm'ring, stagg'ring, puling, puny child:

120. Quoted in Jacobus, *Tradition and Experiment in Wordsworth's 'Lyrical Ballads'* (1798), p. 47.

121. *Essays on Song-Writing*, p. 30.

122. *Essays*, p. 119.

123. See N. Stephen Bauer, 'Early Burlesques and Parodies of Wordsworth', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 74, 4 (October, 1975), 553-569.

But the great mother of a noble race,
 Full-shap'd, harmonious, firm in voice and pace,
 Inform'd by science, and array'd by grace.

(15-18, 23-28)¹²⁴

This personification of the 'mimic art' of simplicity as 'the great mother of a noble race' accurately reflects the emphasis on emotion and uniformity. The mimetic theory of poetic language implicit in discussions of simplicity assumed a uniformity of emotional response which was regarded as morally and socially unifying rather than morally neutral and socially divisive in the manner of poetry which appealed solely to the fancy or the understanding.

It was Coleridge, who was responsible for the most thorough criticism of Wordsworth's supposed deviations from this theory. Coleridge criticized Wordsworth, for example, for thinking that the language and manners of rural life were distinctive and argued -

The thoughts, feelings, language and manners of the shepherd-farmers in the vales of Cumberland and Westmoreland, as far as they are actually adopted in those poems, may be accounted for from causes which will and do produce the same results in every state of life, whether in town or country.¹²⁵

Coleridge identified these unifying causes as moral, specifically, 'independence', 'the necessity of industry and a frugal simplicity of domestic life', and piety.¹²⁶ He argued that Wordsworth's real purpose in choosing rural characters was to demonstrate the uniformity of human nature -

[His] guiding principle and main object... was to attack and subdue that state of association which leads us to place the chief value on those things on which man differs from man, and to forget or disregard the high dignities which belong to human nature,

124. [Richard Mant?], *The Simpliciad* (London, 1808), p. 8.

125. Watson, p. 190.

126. Id.

the sense and the feeling which may be, and ought to be, found in all ranks.¹²⁷

Yet, again conventionally, Coleridge excluded poetic genius from his catalogue of shared 'dignities' because it was least likely to be encouraged in circumstances of poverty; for this reason he criticized Wordsworth for the improbability of his poetic pedlar in *The Excursion*.¹²⁸

Just as Coleridge attempted to assimilate Wordsworth's purpose to the moral and social uniformity of simplicity, measured from a middle-class vantage-point, so he inferred from Wordsworth's theory 'praise of uniform adherence to genuine, logical English',¹²⁹ which he described as 'the neutral style' 'where the scholar and the poet supplies the material, but the perfect well-bred gentleman the expressions and the arrangement'.¹³⁰ He was thus able to argue that Wordsworth's advocacy of 'a rustic's language, purified from all provincialism and grossness' was merely a perverse way of defining 'the neutral style'.¹³¹ In doing so, however, he failed to take proper account of the didactic and experimental elements in the Preface. He realized that, as we have already noted, Wordsworth was more concerned to differentiate the language of 'humble and rustic life' from poetic diction than to define its distinctiveness but he assumed from this that Wordsworth had allowed a polemical manner of expressing his preference for 'the language of

127. Ibid., p. 253. Marilyn Butler has suggested that Coleridge disliked Wordsworth's poetic theory of language because 'it took the common people, their experience and language, as its proper standard' (*Romantics, Rebels and Reactionaries*, p. 63) and that it was only in the increasingly conservative climate of opinion after the French Revolution that the theory seemed other than commonplace (p. 61). Yet Coleridge, in the passage quoted, praises the universalizing aspect of Wordsworth's theory. He objected only to what seemed to be Wordsworth's eccentrically specific choice of the language of the rural poor as a model. Butler's exclusive concentration on the 'simplicity and universalism' of Wordsworth's theory (p. 63) reveals assumptions about it which are not, it seems to me, significantly different from Coleridge's.

128. Watson, pp. 254-257.

129. Ibid., p. 229.

130. Ibid., pp. 222, 225.

131. Ibid., p. 196.

nature and of good sense' to become, as he put it in a letter to Thomas Poole, '*sectarian*',¹³² -

I apprehend that in the clear perception, not unaccompanied with disgust or contempt, of the gaudy affectations of a style which passed too current with too many for poetic diction (though in truth it had as little pretensions to poetry as to logic or common sense), he narrowed his view for a time; and feeling a justifiable preference for the language of nature and of good sense, even in its humblest and least ornamented forms, he suffered himself to express, in terms at once too large and too exclusive, his predilection for a style the most remote possible from the false and showy splendor which he wished to explode. It is possible that this predilection, at first merely comparative, deviated for a time into direct partiality.¹³³

It is also possible, however, that Wordsworth's '*sectarian*' manner, in the passages in the Preface in which he recommended rural language and in the poems in which he attempted to put that recommendation into practice, expressed not simply the extremity of his antipathy to poetic diction but the extremity of his definition of it. Perhaps Wordsworth, suspicious of a poetic language described as '*natural language*',¹³⁴ was less ready than Coleridge to associate the so-called '*language of nature*' with what he described as '*manners connected with the permanent objects of nature and partaking of the simplicity of those objects*' rather than with '*transitory manners reflecting the wearisome unintelligible obliquities of city-life*'.¹³⁵ Wordsworth's criticism of poetic diction extended both to diction which was merely customary because it did not embody felt experience and diction which was merely personal and therefore not productive of an habitual morality.

It is true that Wordsworth held the belief in uniformity that Coleridge imputed to him and that his ultimate aim was, as Coleridge assumed, to imitate '*the general passions and thoughts and feelings of men*',¹³⁶ which was generally accepted as the aim of the universal

132. Letter to Thomas Poole, 14 October, 1803; Griggs, II (1956), p. 1013.

133. Watson, pp. 222-223.

134. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 161.

135. Letter to Samuel Taylor Coleridge, 27 February, 1799; Low, p. 131.

136. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 142.

language of simplicity. But I would suggest that he sought to achieve this aim not by means of an exemplary style which exposed excesses by being itself correct but by means of a more didactically functional style which referred to conventional expectations, 'pre-established codes of decision', such as that which, for example, equated the language of gentlemen with the language of nature, in order to reveal their inadequacy and prepare for more permanent moral habits. A model for evaluating the Preface more appropriate than that of the mimetic theory of poetic language is, I think, Coleridge's description of the secondary imagination -

It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still, at all events, it struggles to idealize and to unify.¹³⁷

Coleridge accepted, I would suggest, the conventional distinction between the common language of nature and the uncommon language of fancy but thought that his own poetry of vital imagination, a peculiarly poetic passion distinguishable from natural passion, was closer to the latter than the former style -

In my opinion, Poetry justifies, as *Poetry* independent of any other Passion, some new combinations of Language, & *commands* the omission of many others allowable in other compositions / Now Wordsworth, me saltem judice, has in his system not sufficiently admitted the former, & in his practice has too frequently sinned against the latter. - Indeed, we have had lately some little controversy on this subject - & we begin to suspect, that there is, somewhere or other, a *radical* Difference [in our] opinions...¹³⁸

Wordsworth differed from Coleridge in questioning such classificatory 'combinations of Language' in favour of a transcendent unity of passion and poetry, '*imagination and sentiment*' -

[I]n proportion as ideas and feelings are valuable, whether the composition be in prose or in verse, they require and exact one and the same language.¹³⁹

Nevertheless, as Coleridge realized, it is Wordsworth's poetry that best interprets his theory. Coleridge sought to prove his case that

137. Watson, p. 167.

138. Letter to William Sotheby, 13 July, 1802; Griggs, II (1956), p. 812.

139. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 164.

Wordsworth's recommendation of rural language was an expendable eccentricity by demonstrating that the language of his poems was not peculiar to rustic speech and that the syntax was not an accurate reproduction of it. As an example he adduced the first stanza of 'The Last of the Flock'.¹⁴⁰ What Coleridge, in attempting to assimilate this poem to the norm of simplicity, failed to acknowledge was that the poem, by representing with a similar language characters of widely different social status, one a gentleman traveller and the other a small farmer, contravenes the rule of dramatic propriety. Secondly, the style of the first stanza, far from being transparent, makes obvious use of tautology, one of the most parodied of Wordsworth's stylistic devices¹⁴¹ -

In distant countries have I been,
And yet I have not often seen
A healthy man, a man full grown,
Weep in the public roads, alone.
But such a one, on English ground,
And in the broad highway, I met;
Along the broad highway he came,
His cheeks with tears were wet:
Sturdy he seemed, though he was sad;
And in his arms a Lamb he had.

(1-10)

In a note to 'The Thorn' Wordsworth suggests that the use of tautology may be a dramatic indication of 'the inadequateness of our own powers, or the deficiencies of language'.¹⁴² In the above passage it seems to reflect the narrator's inability to comprehend not why the man is weeping but why a healthy adult is weeping publicly. In other words, it is the impropriety of the man's grief rather than the grief itself that he finds disturbing; it is appropriate that the cause of his weeping is mentioned

140. Watson, pp. 201-202.

141. See, for example, John Hamilton Reynolds, *Peter Bell. A Lyrical Ballad* -

Not a brother owneth he,
Peter Bell he hath no brother;
His mother had no other son,
No other son e'er call'd her mother;
Peter Bell hath brother none.

(52-56)

(John Hamilton Reynolds, *Poetry and Prose*, edited by G.L. Marsh (London, 1928), p. 79).

142. De Selincourt, II (1952), p. 513.

incidentally in the last line. The stanza's tautology is as abnormal as the meeting is unexpected and the absurdly repetitive verse evokes in the reader an embarrassment equivalent to the narrator's. It is as though the social rule that forbids the public display of strong emotion by men and so inhibits the encounter between the gentleman and the farmer is a dramatic analogue of the stylistic rule that forbids deviations from a similarly arbitrary norm and so inhibited the proper appreciation of the poem by Wordsworth's parodists. Rural speech functions in Wordsworth's poetry, it seems to me, not as an actual model but as a symbolic goal, representative of a style as liberated from conventional rules as the farmer's grief. Yet an uncertainty underlies this ambition similar to Coleridge's hesitation about the re-creating powers of the secondary imagination. The poem, with its obvious improprieties, remains implicated in the rules whose inadequacies and deficiencies it seeks to expose and transcend. Whereas the narrator addresses the farmer as 'friend' (15), the latter replies with 'Sir' (17); a perfectly equal relationship and a perfectly 'democratic' style are goals unrealized.

As with Cowper's poetry, Wordsworth's revolt against poetic diction stemmed, as Roger Sharrock has pointed out, from a distrust of language and a desire to preserve actual experience.¹⁴³ Yet, as with Cowper also, this revolt rarely issued in a poetry of painstaking naturalism. Coleridge implied otherwise when he criticized Wordsworth's 'matter-of-factness', which he defined as 'a laborious minuteness and fidelity in the representation of objects and their positions as they appeared to the poet himself'.¹⁴⁴ However, this criticism is preceded by lengthy extracts from 'Resolution and Independence', the poem in which 'matter-of-factness' is dramatically placed; the narrator's repeated attempts to record the leech-gatherer's speech, for example, are yet another manifestation of his deteriorating and increasingly solipsistic apprehension of the external world. Rural speech in Wordsworth's poetry, like the leech-gatherer's speech, is not representative but is 'above the reach / Of ordinary men' (95-96); its significance, if not grasped by a spontaneous

143. Roger Sharrock, 'Wordsworth's Revolt Against Literature', *Essays in Criticism*, 3 (1953), 396-412.

144. Watson, p. 251.

act of imaginative intuition, escapes the most scrupulously exact imitation. Sharrock suggests that in *Lyrical Ballads* 'the stress is upon the retention of speech, visual observations, or states of emotion, not their transmutation'.¹⁴⁵ Yet what is noticeable about poems such as 'The Last of the Flock' and 'Goody Blake and Harry Gill' are the experimental techniques used to prevent the reader from approaching the poetry as a transcript of evidence. Even those poems most vulnerable to Coleridge's criticism because of their emphasis on direct quotation, poems such as the original version of 'Old Man Travelling' and 'The Sailor's Mother', are presented as dramatic encounters rather than observed events.¹⁴⁶ Those critics who have inferred from the Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* a relatively uncomplicated idea of mimesis have tended to neglect Wordsworth's emphasis on the purpose of his poetry, the education of the reader's sensibility. Wordsworth thought, I would suggest, that the proper 'retention' of experience required a 'transmutation' of the reader's habitual associations by means of the poet's creative power. Thus one of the qualities which he regarded as peculiar to the poet was

an ability of conjuring up in himself passions, which are indeed far from being the same as those produced by real events, yet (especially in those parts of the general sympathy which are pleasing and delightful) do more nearly resemble the passions produced by real events, than anything which, from the motions of their own minds merely, other men are accustomed to feel for themselves...¹⁴⁷

As we have seen, the most immediate consequence of Wordsworth's style is to frustrate conventional expectations by, for example, refusing to distinguish his characters from the narrator's changing perceptions of them, leaving the narrator's role undefined, evading the formal requirements of the verse of regularity, consistency and development or by emphasizing apparent discrepancies between manner and matter. The effect, far from being indiscriminately disruptive, is to encourage the reader to be suspicious of the formalizing aspects of poetry, which tend

145. Sharrock, p. 401.

146. Stephen Parrish suggests that *Lyrical Ballads* places an innovative emphasis on drama (pp. 11-14, 135-141).

147. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 138.

to isolate 'the Poet's dream' ('Elegiac Stanzas Suggested by a Picture of Peele Castle', 16) from the contingencies of ordinary experience. The image of Peele Castle in the still sea, for example, seems to require, in its evocation of art's promise of continuity, the artist's 'consecration' (16) which would fix it for eternity -

Whene'er I looked, thy Image still was there;
It trembled, but it never passed away.

(7-8)

But such an image is now for Wordsworth, after his brother's death, an oblique and painful reference to all that must pass away. We grow, Wordsworth implies, to an awareness of the deceptiveness of art (the still Image) which is not incompatible with an appreciation of the fact that art, by virtue of its very fictiveness, helps us to sustain 'what is to be borne' (58). The image of the castle in the still sea is just as false to the horror of drowning as the painting of the castle as it 'braves' (50) the stormy sea and yet both are a reminder of what is beyond art and, in so far as they encourage 'fortitude, and patient cheer' (57), both fulfil their promise of continuity.

An exquisite example of this alienating tendency in Wordsworth's poetry, which not only does not suspend disbelief but actually exposes the poetry's limitations, is the first stanza of 'Anecdote for Fathers' -

I have a boy of five years old;
His face is fair and fresh to see;
His limbs are cast in beauty's mould,
And dearly he loves me.

(1-4)

The poetry immediately begins to create from the speaking voice a personality, proprietorial ('I have...') in the pride and confidence with which it appeals to public scrutiny and public standards ('beauty's mould') and at the same time conscious of a certain self-indulgence, a good-humoured and half-serious exhibitionism which the jaunty rhythm and careless alliteration help to convey. Yet this formal structure, consistent, regular and addressed to the public, collapses with the halting rhythm of the fourth line, which reveals an unexpected humility, wonder and gratitude; the proprietorial 'I' has become a vulnerably passive 'me'. It is as though we have suddenly been allowed a glimpse beneath an adult pose. It is a reversal that not only prepares for the greater reversal at the end of the poem but also frees the reader from the poem's ingratiating tone. A discrepancy between the public and private

faces of the narrator is revealed and Wordsworth, in defiance of Jeffrey's advocacy of the public, invites us to compare them without endorsing either - for is there not in the emphatic 'dearly' an assertiveness as suspect as the earlier casual confidence? Such an occasional irregularity works like the discovery of the unfinished sheepfold in the mountains, freeing the imagination from the constraints of a particular mode of perception and response by drawing attention to its contingency.

What saved Wordsworth from a debilitating nihilistic scepticism was the belief that irregularities required a context of regularity to be significant. It is this belief that explains, I think, analogies in Wordsworth's treatment of apparently disparate matters. For example, the importance of metre is, according to Wordsworth, to restrain unbearable excitement by connecting it to a state of ordinary feeling.¹⁴⁸ Similarly the importance of property, in poems such as 'Michael', 'Alice Fell' and 'The Last of the Flock', or regular employment, as in 'Resolution and Independence', or continued independence, as in 'The Old Cumberland Beggar', is to ensure the repetition of habits which connect the past with the future and which Wordsworth regarded as the source of moral conduct. If his manner of approaching these subjects seems to have little regard for the actual priorities of the rural culture he is advocating, this is because he refuses to acknowledge any guide other than his own sensibility. Wordsworth, unlike Burns, never seriously attempted to trace in the poor any distinctive moral sense. As F.R. Leavis has said, Wordsworth's interest in rustic life is 'in something felt as external to the world to which he belongs, and very remote from it'.¹⁴⁹ He accepted conventional assessments, agreeing that the poor were mean and even ridiculous or, alternatively, assimilating them, in a familiar idealization, to higher classes; he describes a female beggar, for example, as 'fit person for a Queen' ('Beggars', 10) and states that Burns showed him

148. Ibid., p. 146.

149. F.R. Leavis, *The Common Pursuit* (London, 1952), p. 192.

How Verse may build a princely throne
On humble truth.

('At the Grave of Burns', 35-36)¹⁵⁰

Canon Rawnsley's account of villagers' reminiscences of Wordsworth suggests that Wordsworth, at least in later life, kept his distance.¹⁵¹ However, if the leech-gatherer, for example, seemed to Wordsworth ridiculous, this did not lead, as with Jeffrey, to a reaffirmation of the preconceptions prompting that judgment but to introspection and an ultimate acknowledgement not of inferiority or superiority but of difference. It was that sense of difference, of the relativity of one's outlook, that Wordsworth could expect to pass on to his middle-class readers. Wordsworth disapproved of Crabbe's attempts at realism because Crabbe seemed to attend to unconventional subjects without trying to develop in his readers unconventional sensibilities.¹⁵² The truly

150. Compare, for example, Crabbe's reference to Shenstone's 'The School-Mistress' in *The Borough* -

By thee the Mistress of a village-school
Became a queen, enthroned upon her stool...
(*'Inns'*, 11-12)

151. H.D. Rawnsley, *Lake Country Sketches* (Glasgow, 1903), pp. 1-58.

152. See Pollard, pp. 290-293 and the *Essay, Supplementary to the Preface* - The appropriate business of poetry, (which, nevertheless, if genuine, is as permanent as pure science,) her appropriate employment, her privilege and her *duty*, is to treat of things not as they *are*, but as they *appear*; not as they exist in themselves, but as they *seem* to exist to the *senses*, and to the *passions*.

(Owen and Smyser, III, p. 63)

W.J.B. Owen describes such statements as expressionist and argues that Wordsworth gradually reached this position from a realist starting-point (Owen, *Wordsworth As Critic*, pp. 56-114). Yet such a dichotomy, it seems to me, is false to Wordsworth's practice in poems as early as 'Goody Blake' and 'The Thorn' and his consistent argument in both the Preface and the supplementary Essay that poetry is both the imitation and recreation of passion, a theory which cannot be said to be either mimetic or expressive, though it is certainly emotivist (see Stephen Prickett's refutation of I.A. Richards's distinction between 'Realist' and 'Projective' attitudes to nature, as applied to Coleridge and Wordsworth: Prickett, pp. 22-45). The analogy between poetry and science in the above passage recalls a section in the revised Preface of 1802 in which Wordsworth suggests that whereas the man of science contemplates particular facts and the poet the pleasure and pain connected with them, the knowledge derived from such contemplation cannot be abstracted from the interaction of fact and feeling (Owen and Smyser, I, p. 140).

individual sensibility is that which rises above the triviality of society without succumbing to the inhumanity of nature. Yet at the same time the significance of that sensibility lies in its links with society and nature.

In the revised Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* (1802) Wordsworth emphasizes the centrality of 'passion' in his poetry in a manner which helps to clarify this apparently incongruous blend of egotism and impersonality. The poet, according to Wordsworth, approaches a reciprocity with the external world, a matching of poetic passion to 'passions as manifested in the goings-on of the Universe'.¹⁵³ Wordsworth's low estimation of personal feelings stemmed from the fact that he was concerned not so much with what is distinctive to the individual and therefore dies with the individual as with what continues beyond the individual, merging with other lives. He hoped to achieve the kind of poetry which would combine the universality of natural permanence with the particular perseverance associated with individual suffering, a passionate stasis exemplified in the Preface to *Poems* (1815) by the image of the leech-gatherer as both sea-beast and stone -

The stone is endowed with something of the power of life to approximate it to the sea-beast; and the sea-beast stripped of some of its vital qualities to assimilate it to the stone; which intermediate image is thus treated for the purpose of bringing the original image, that of the stone, to a nearer resemblance to the figure and condition of the aged Man; who is divested of so much of the indications of life and motion as to bring him to the point where the two objects unite and coalesce in just comparison.¹⁵⁴

Just as in 'Resolution and Independence' the contradictory qualities of power and permanence are brought together by a process of imagination which consists of judicious adding and subtracting, so in poetry generally Wordsworth endeavoured to discover a principle of selection which might result in language 'as exquisitely fitted for the passion as that which the real passion itself suggests'.¹⁵⁵ Blake, always wary of accepting limits to human creativity and more committed to the vatic image of the

153. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 138.

154. Ibid., III, p. 33.

155. Ibid., I, p. 139.

poet than Wordsworth ever was, commented on a similar passage in *The Excursion* - 'You shall not bring me down to believe such fitting & fitted'.¹⁵⁶

However, in the revised Preface Wordsworth also acknowledges that it is impossible for the poet to discover such a 'fitted' language, that 'his situation is altogether slavish and mechanical, compared with the freedom and power of real and substantial action and suffering'.¹⁵⁷ Although it would be difficult to over-emphasize the significance of memory to Wordsworth, he also recognized that the poet could not bridge the gap between action and observation, poetry and passion, by memory alone.¹⁵⁸ Poetry, for Wordsworth, was a form of imitative magic (rather than magical creation); he wrote of imitating the passions 'produced by real events' in terms of 'conjuring', 'delusion', 'faith'.¹⁵⁹ The image of the leech-gatherer as sea-beast and stone is not the imaginative apprehension of an essential reality but evidence of alienation which allows a cavalier tampering with the facts. Yet Wordsworth refused to accept that the poet's inability to recreate the real world restricts him to solipsistic invention, that he might become 'a translator, who does not scruple to substitute excellencies of another kind for those which are unattainable by him'; 'this', he wrote, 'would be to encourage idleness and despair'.¹⁶⁰ Like Michael, Wordsworth continued to labour on his inheritance in the knowledge that his justifications of his labour had collapsed. His poetry might profitably be compared with the unfinished sheepfold as fragmentary evidence of a striving towards collaboration,

156. Erdman, p. 656.

157. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 138.

158. See the distinction between memory and imagination in the 1815 Preface.

159. Owen and Smyser, I, pp. 138-139.

160. Owen and Smyser, I, p. 139.

or at least detente, with the real world, a poor record of failed passion, the survival of which is nevertheless necessary for collective survival.¹⁶¹

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161. It is more common to see in Wordsworth's poetry what Paul Sheats has described as 'a gradual emancipation of Wordsworth's deepest feelings from the temporal world', which is replaced as a source of hope by 'the power and immortal destiny of the mind' (Paul D. Sheats, *The Making of Wordsworth's Poetry, 1785-1798* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973), p. 250; see also, for example, F.W. Bateson, *Wordsworth: A Re-interpretation*, second edition (London, 1956), pp. 146-174; John Jones, *The Egotistical Sublime*; Jonathan Wordsworth, *The Music of Humanity*, pp. 212-215). Here also, however, I would suggest that there is more consistency in Wordsworth's poetry than is usually granted it. The fact that Frances Ferguson, in *Wordsworth: Language as Counter-Spirit* (New Haven and London, 1977), reaches similar conclusions to mine by an entirely different route perhaps provides some support for this suggestion (even though our separate routes lead us to concentrate on different meanings of 'passion' in Wordsworth's poetry - Ferguson equates 'passion' primarily with love which seems to testify 'to the possibility of shared experience' (p. 249) whereas I have interpreted 'passion' primarily as varieties of suffering, of which love, usually followed in Wordsworth's poetry by loss, is only one form. Ferguson's definition does not, I think, account fully for figures such as the leech-gatherer, human approximations of inhuman nature, whose primary effect is not love but admonishment, a reminder of limits rather than connections. Wordsworth ranks general sympathy above personal affection in a hierarchy of 'passion' which makes Ferguson's division of Wordsworth's poetry into affective aspects, in which correspondence (love) is established and lost, and cognitive aspects, which undermine that initial correspondence, reductively categorical. But these are quibbles which only deserve a parenthesis). Ferguson also refers to 'the nearly astonishing consistency in Wordsworth's poetry' and concludes - 'It may be that Wordsworth's famous "decline" itself resulted from the asceticism of his poetics, but that asceticism was pronounced from the outset of his poetic career' (p. xv).

Many critics, following Bateson, have discovered a crisis in Wordsworth's attitude to nature in the poems of 1798 and have delineated a subsequent recovery along the lines summarized by Sheats. However, poems such as the Immortality Ode do not seem to me to be more optimistic than earlier poems such as 'Michael', which also looks finally not to nature in itself but to 'Strength in what remains behind', 'the primal sympathy' ('Intimations of Immortality', 180-181) which rests not in the individual but in the collective mind linking men with each other and with nature. Wordsworth is rarely, I think, as assured as Sheats suggests when he refers to Wordsworth's belief in 'the mind's hegemony over the sensible world' (p. 250); it is because Wordsworth's intimations of immortality are usually occasional that I have decided to use the more stoical term 'survival' (but see n. 74). However, the limits of this study prevent me from doing justice to Sheats's interpretation.

Chapter 8

Epilogue: John Clare

If we are satisfied that in the Society which we frequent certain subjects must not be even alluded to, we must either conform to the rules of that Society or quit it.

(Letter from James Hessey to John Clare, 11 July, 1820)

The rural poor functioned in poetry as a means of either reinforcing an urban middle-class consensus in the name of order or rejecting it for the sake of a more rare and difficult unity. If this is not too crude a summary, it is curiously appropriate that the best known poets amongst the rural poor themselves either achieved success but lost their distinctiveness or maintained their independence but lost their fame. Stephen Duck, for example, after gaining the patronage of Queen Caroline, turned to writing the conventional kind of courtly pastoral against which he had earlier protested in his innovatively naturalistic poem, 'The Thresher's Labour'. Ann Yearsley, on the other hand, rejected the expectations of deference which patronage aroused by refusing to accept that money raised by subscription to her first volume of poems should be held in trust for her by Hannah More. Eleven years after the ensuing controversy which caused her popularity to decline she introduced a volume of poems in the following defiant manner -

It is asserted that, "if Alexander and Caesar had been born in a cottage, they would have died in obscurity." ...[I]f the "walls of a cottage" could have entombed for ever such mighty spirits as those of Caesar and Alexander, how must the clown "dazzle", who emerges from the sequestered gloom with his wits about him!¹

Yearsley here defines herself by means of an ironic use of conventional terms ('obscurity', 'clown') just as Wordsworth, for example, wrote original poetry about the poor by misusing conventional techniques. It is because the career of the poor rural poet was especially prone to

1. Ann Yearsley, *The Rural Lyre* (London, 1796), pp. v-vi.

imitate the shape of literature that John Clare, the best of them (for Burns, as many of Clare's contemporaries realized,² is improperly included in this company), provides a fitting *résumé* of the best rural poetry.

One of Clare's most perceptive critics, John Barrell, in tracing the evolution of a purely descriptive and local style in Clare's poetry, has, in fact, criticized his earliest poems for their confusion of life and literature. He argues, for example, that in 'Helpstone', probably written between 1809 and 1815, Clare attempted to protest against the destructive effects of enclosure in changing the local landscape of Helpstone in terms of the tradition of the poetry of melancholy, which, because it contrasts the transience of youth with the permanence of nature, contradicts Clare's intended argument.³ I want to suggest that Clare's use of convention in 'Helpstone' is less confused and self-contradictory and more revealing than Barrell makes it appear. It is true that the particular protest against enclosure in the poem is muted by Clare's emphasis on the passing of his childhood but this only serves, I think, to make the general sense of protest more bitter; the enclosure becomes yet another instance of social injustice and disappointment as inevitable as age and the decline into winter -

So little birds, in winter's frost and snow,
Doom'd, like to me, want's keener frost to know,
Searching for food and 'better life', in vain
(Each hopeful track the yielding snows retain),
First on the ground each fairy dream pursue,
Though sought in vain...
Till, like to me, these victims of the blast,
Each foolish, fruitless wish resign'd at last,
Are glad to seek the place from whence they went
And put up with distress, and be content.

(17-22, 27-30)⁴

2. See, for example, John Scott, *London Magazine*, 1 (March, 1820), 323-328; Storey, p. 78 -

John Clare cannot be put forth as the rival of Burns, for the latter, as has been remarked of him by others, is misrepresented when described as an unlettered peasant.

3. *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, pp. 110-115.

4. *The Poems of John Clare*, edited by J.W. Tibble, 2 vols (London, 1935), I, p. 3. All quotations from Clare's poetry are from this edition.

Clare's apparent misuse of a phrase from *The Deserted Village* ('die at home at last') in the conclusion of 'Helpstone' is taken by Barrell as proof of Clare's confusing emphasis on the permanence of nature in a poem intended to lament nature's vulnerability at the hands of 'Accursed Wealth' (111) -

[W]hereas Goldsmith's hope cannot now be fulfilled, Clare has not been so thoroughly expelled from his Eden that he cannot look forward to a comfortable old age there.⁵

Certainly the poem's conclusion does refer to comfort and renewal, hinting perhaps at the return of spring. But the resemblance between the conclusion and the earlier passage quoted above, in which the return home is associated with a resigned acceptance of the delusiveness of youthful hopes, suggests that the wish to 'die at home' might actually be less than comforting -

When all the hopes, that charm'd me once, are o'er,
To warm my soul in ecstasy no more,
By disappointments prov'd a foolish cheat,
Each ending bitter, and beginning sweet;
When weary age the grave, a rescue, seeks,
And prints its image on my wrinkled cheeks -
Those charms of youth, that I again may see,
May it be mine to meet my end in thee;
And, as reward for all my troubles past,
Find one hope true - to die at home at last!

(147-156)

Mark Storey has noted that in the original manuscript this conclusion is followed by lines that confirm its ambivalence -

every wish that leaves the aching breast
Flies to the spot where all its wishes rest⁶

Clare seeks not the fulfilment of his wishes in Helpstone but their 'rest'. It is clear that the poet is looking forward not to 'old age', as Barrell assumes, but to 'the grave' as 'a rescue' from 'weary age'. The metaphor of age printing its image on the poet's cheeks recalls an image in the earlier passage quoted of the birds imprinting their tracks in the snow, a metaphor of the poet's transitory youth; the image of flying in the manuscript conclusion indicates perhaps that this parallel

5. *The Idea of Landscape and the Sense of Place*, p. 114.

6. Mark Storey, *The Poetry of John Clare: A Critical Introduction* (London, 1974), p. 7.

is not fortuitous. Implicit in the counterpointing of 'weary age' and 'Those charms of youth' is possibly a hope that dying may restore nature's apparent receptivity to a youthful optimism (just as 'the yielding snows' retained 'Each hopeful track' of the birds) so that the poet is no longer merely a victim etched by circumstance. His last hope, in this 'ending bitter', is the end of hoping and it is only when this end is met and the poet is secure from further disappointment that the 'charms of youth', when nature seemed permanently flourishing and disappointment was unknown, may be seen again. However, the poem is so closely tied to the tradition of the poetry of melancholy, as Barrell has demonstrated, and the end of hoping is so proximate to death that there remains in the conclusion the suggestion that this desperate hope will prove as evanescent as the snow-tracks in 'the blast'; the aspect of natural permanence which predominates in the poem, whose ending recalls its beginning, is the permanent return of winter.

It is impossible to disentangle in 'Helpstone' the actual Helpstone from the observed or remembered Helpstone or the actual life of the poet from his current mood and it seems to me that Clare exploits in each of the conventions from which he borrows a similar ambivalence about the connection between the objective and the subjective. What the convention of protest, associated with Goldsmith, and the convention of melancholic resignation, exemplified by Gray, have in common, as their coming together in 'Helpstone' makes clear, is the attempt to make the individual experience representative. Either the poet attempts to adopt the impersonal perspective of nature in order to come to terms with a loss made more painful by not being shared, as in Gray's 'Sonnet on the Death of Richard West', or he seeks in the imagined universality of his predicament a source of consolation, as in Gray's *Elegy* (which influenced the beginning of 'Helpstone'), or a stimulus to protest as in *The Deserted Village*.

Whereas Clare has been criticized by John Barrell for extending the particular protest to a conventional melancholy and by Raymond Williams for extending the loss of a local landscape to the loss of Nature,⁷ I

7. *The Country and the City*, pp. 137-139.

wish to suggest that the obvious awkwardness of these generalizations is, to a certain extent, the subject of 'Helpstone'. For example, the poet, separated from 'the vulgar' by his genius and from 'the vain' by his origins (10), seeks to include himself in the natural community but only by means of an analogy which is overtly fallacious, as the use of inverted commas around 'better life' (19) in the 'little birds' simile makes clear. The phrase repeated in this passage and elsewhere, 'in vain', is perhaps borrowed from Gray's 'Sonnet on the Death of Richard West', in which it is used to emphasize the poet's isolation. For Clare, however, it has become a conventional means of universalizing a sense of personal frustration. Similarly the reiteration of 'fond' (in the sense of both 'loving' and 'foolish') in abstractions such as 'fond taste' and 'fond memory' is a means of justifying as typical the emotional attachment to Helpstone which he retains in spite of the suspicion that it is irrational. Convention is, for Clare, a way of making sense of his personal distress and also perhaps of ending it, for 'poets' song' (5) may be the means of rescuing both Helpstone and its poet from obscurity, the hope with which the poem begins.

However, the poem's burden, 'in vain', also recalls 'the vain' (10), Clare's social superiors, as though hope were merely another form of self-indulgence; in 'Summer Morning', for example, Clare refers to 'Art's bungling vanity' (48).⁸ The hope with which the poem begins may be no less delusive than the conventionally expressed hope with which it concludes or than the attempt to equate the local idiom ('put up with distress') with a moral commonplace ('and be content') (30). This line interprets the conventional recommendation of contentment from the poor man's perspective and reveals it to be a euphemism for tolerated misery. It is perhaps appropriate that Clare describes the attachment to Helpstone with which he seeks to comfort himself by such conventional

8. 'Summer Morning' contains a stanza which is thematically close to the opening of 'Helpstone' -

So emerging into light
From the ignorant and vain,
Fearful genius takes her flight,
Skimming o'er the lowly plain.
(57-60)

recommendations as 'fond taste', an emotionally necessary but irrational version of a conventional sensibility.⁹

This interpretation, of course, may not refer to any intention of which the very young Clare would have been fully conscious but what gives me some confidence in presenting it as more than the accidental coherence of a confused amalgamation of conventions is Clare's extraordinarily assured parodies in other early poems of the literary tradition which he had inherited. For example, in 'Address to Plenty in Winter', written in the metre of poems such as Matthew Green's *The Spleen* and Robert Lloyd's 'The Cit's Country Box', references to Pope, Thomson and Cowper coalesce to convey the complacent, plethoric and tedious life-style of a retired gentleman. What makes the satire especially disarming is Clare's ability, learnt possibly from Burns, to create for himself a comic persona, who sees the parodied life-style as the culmination of his ideals, as in the following passage in which Cowper is discernible -

Plenty! now thy gifts bestow;
Exit bid to every woe;
Take me in, shut out the blast,
Make the doors and windows fast;
Place me in some corner, where,
Lolling in some elbow chair,
Happy, blest to my desire,
I may find a rousing fire;
While in chimney-corner nigh,
Coal, or wood, a fresh supply,
Ready stands for laying on,
Soon as t'other's burnt and gone.

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9. The awkwardness of Clare's use of the word 'taste' in his poetry reflects the uncertainty, to which we have already referred (see pp. 185-190), as to whether taste extended to the poor. For Clare, the word belonged to the world of liberal education and could be applied to anything from correct evaluation to proper knowledge, as in the following passage from 'Cowper Green' -

Chance unbares the shining beads,
That to tasteful minds display
Relics of the Druid day...

(160-162)

Whenever Clare ascribed 'taste' to himself, it was an assertion of his connection with the world of his readers. In 'Helpstone', in which such an assertion is suspected of being vanity, it is 'fond taste' that he ascribes to himself.

Now and then, as taste decreed,
 In a book a page I'd read;
 And, inquiry to amuse,
 Peep at something in the news;
 See who's married, and who's dead,
 And who, though bankrupt, beg their bread...

(79-96)

'Address to Plenty in Winter' is a kind of comic version of 'Helpstone', presenting convention as an ideal known to be false but coveted nonetheless.

The dilemma which Clare confronted so variously in such poems he never resolved. Poetic and social success meant loss of integrity but gain of some measure of control over his life and hence over his poetry; integrity, on the other hand, meant loyalty to a style of life and of poetry dangerously subject to circumstance. This led, as John Taylor, Clare's publisher, pointed out in the introduction to *The Village Minstrel* (1821), to a divided sensibility; Clare could not indulge his real feelings without being simultaneously aware that they were idiosyncratic and isolating. And so he felt it necessary to anchor them to convention, 'to be', as Taylor wrote, 'as much a philosopher as another man when the fit is off'.¹⁰ In support of this comment Taylor quotes from a letter in which Clare reveals surprisingly little compunction in dismissing the entire tendency of his poetry as 'foolishness' (or, in the words of 'Helpstone', 'fond taste') -

My two favourite elm trees at the back of the hut are condemned to die - it shocks me to relate it, but 'tis true. The savage who owns them thinks they have done their best, and now he wants to make use of the benefits he can get from selling them. O was this country Egypt, and was I but a caliph, the owner should lose his ears for his arrogant presumption; and the first wretch that buried his axe in their roots should hang on their branches as a terror to the rest. I have been several mornings to bid them farewell. Had I one hundred pounds to spare I would buy them reprieves - but they must die. Yet this mourning over trees is all foolishness - they feel no pains - they are but wood, cut up or not. A second thought tells me I am a fool: were people all to feel as I do, the world could not be carried on, - a green would not be ploughed - a tree or bush would not be cut for firing or furniture, and every thing they found when boys would remain in that

10. Storey, *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, p. 138.

state till they died. This is my indisposition, and you will laugh at it...¹¹

If we imagine the poet of 'Resolution and Independence' halted at the stage of despondency, aware that his youthful sense of communion with nature was based on a fallacious projection of his own desire ('every thing they found when boys would remain in that state till they died') but unable to progress beyond it, we find, I think, a fairly accurate analogue for Clare.

What encourages me to present this dilemma as a consequence of Clare's social status as a poor rural poet is its appearance, in surprisingly similar form, in notes for composition by Robert Bloomfield, the most successful 'peasant' poet -

Inclosing Acts! I do not much like the rage for them. They cut down the solemn, the venerable tree, and *sometimes* plant another, - *not always*; like a mercenary soldier, who kills more than he begets. Resolved - As shepherds are thus going out of fashion, and smiths, &c., coming in: could I not make the old steeple lament the destruction of shades as old as itself, and make a shepherd reply? &c. &c. But it grows near "witching time of night", and I perceive I am writing nonsense. If I had a critic here at my elbow, he would have found it out long ago.¹²

In an essay on Clare in the *London Magazine* in 1821 Taylor notes a similar dichotomy between good sense and poetic imagination in 'Langley Bush' -

What truth the story of the swain allows,
That tells of honours which thy young days knew,
Of 'Langley Court' being kept beneath thy boughs,
I cannot tell - thus much I know is true,
That thou art reverenc'd...
Both swains and gipsies seem to love thy name...
To thy declining age I bid farewell,
Like old companions, ne'er to meet again.
(5-9, 13, 19-20)

Taylor's comment is a fine one -

The discretion which makes Clare hesitate to receive as canonical all the accounts he has heard of the former honours of Langley Bush, is in singular contrast with the enthusiasm of his poetical faith. As a man, he cannot bear to be imposed upon, - his good sense revolts at the least attempt to abuse it; - but as

11. Id.

12. *The Remains of Robert Bloomfield*, edited by Joseph Weston, 2 vols (London, 1824), II, pp. 53-54.

a poet, he surrenders his imagination with most happy ease to the illusions which crowd upon it from stories of fairies and ghosts.¹³

In Clare's poetry, as in Wordsworth's, the desire to be true to the personal response is at odds with the concern about its public significance. This conflict was exacerbated for Clare by his social remoteness from the public which he courted. This kind of social division in 'Langley Bush' Taylor, typically, ignores. The role of man of good sense, according to which Clare's observations are detached and uncommitted ('Both swains and gipsies seem to love thy name'), remains opposed to the role of poet, according to which Clare indulges a sense of relationship with the 'swains and gipsies' and their object of reverence.

In 'Helpstone', once the vanity of aspiring beyond the local surroundings had been revealed (we noted the reiteration of 'in vain' in connection with this hope), Clare seemed to be left with an emotional attachment to Helpstone which was felt but suspected of being merely another form of vanity. Bloomfield differed from Clare in being much less anxious about subordinating personal response to public significance; his invocation to the Muse, with which he begins *The Farmer's Boy* (1800), includes the plea 'mould to Truth's fair form what Memory tells' ('Spring', 18).¹⁴ The degree to which Clare derived his sense of identity from memory prevented him from resolving his conflict in this manner. Nevertheless, in his later poetry Clare more confidently separated the rational scepticism from the emotional assent, the self-consciousness from the response. Hence, as John Barrell has demonstrated, his descriptions became more particular and affectionate and less dependent on moral commonplaces. The social poles of 'Helpstone', 'the vulgar' and 'the vain', tended to be correspondingly redefined. For example, whereas the accusation of vanity threatens to undermine the entire structure of 'Helpstone', Clare vacillates in 'Langley Bush', without

13. John Taylor, 'A Visit to John Clare', *London Magazine*, 4 (November, 1821), 540-548; Storey, *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, p. 159.

14. Robert Bloomfield, *Collected Poems*, facsimile reprint (Gainesville, 1971), p. 24.

apparent anxiety, between associating himself with 'the vulgar', who ignorantly invest their surroundings with emotional significance, and with 'the vain', whose detached scepticism reveals a lack of generous 'enthusiasm'. In a letter to Taylor written more than ten years after the letter quoted in the introduction to *The Village Minstrel* the assurance of Clare's awareness of both positions seems almost cynical and the ease with which he moves between them opportunistic -

I have had some difficulties to leave the woods & heaths & favourite spots that have known me so long for the very mole-hills on the heath & the old trees in the hedges seem bidding me farewell...but we must put aside such fancies for a season to live in the world by taking it as we find it... I think that I shall yet live to see myself independant of all but old friends & good health...¹⁵

The use of convention in Clare's poetry reveals an uncertainty about his relationship with his readers which cannot be traced simply to a familiarity with Wordsworth's poetry. Although De Quincey records that Clare in conversation became 'animated with the most hearty and almost rapturous spirit of admiration',¹⁶ whenever Wordsworth was mentioned, this refers to his visit to London in 1824. The earliest of Clare's references to Wordsworth seems to be in January, 1820 when he returned an edition of his poetry to Octavius Gilchrist¹⁷ and Clare's comments before 1824 tend to be disparaging. For example, in 1822 he devised an imitation of Wordsworth's poetry 'in ridicule of his affectations of simplicity'.¹⁸ In 1820, while criticizing Wordsworth for 'lunatic enthusiasm' and 'affected Godliness', he had also praised him for 'originality of

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15. Letter to John Taylor, January, 1832, in *The Letters of John Clare*, edited by J.W. and Anne Tibble (London, 1951), p. 258.
 16. Thomas De Quincey, 'Sketches of Life and Manners', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 7 (December, 1840), 765-776; Storey, *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, p. 246.
 17. Letter to Octavius Gilchrist, January, 1820; J.W. and Anne Tibble, p. 32. Drury, Taylor's cousin, quotes Clare as saying that 'these Wordsworth's, Bowles &c that Mr Gilchrist lends do me no good' (letter to John Taylor, 2 January, 1820; Storey, *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, p. 34).
 18. Letter to John Taylor, 21 February, 1822; J.W. and Anne Tibble, p. 133.

Description',¹⁹ the quality most likely to attract Clare, but he did not recognize any deeper affinity until later. As he wrote in his journal for 29 October, 1824 -

When I first began to read poetry I disliked Wordsworth because I heard he was disliked & I was astonished when I looked into him to find my mistaken pleasure in being delighted & finding him so natural & beautiful.²⁰

The fact that Clare sometimes seems to be acting out the implications of poems such as 'Resolution and Independence' in poetry which preceded a close acquaintance with Wordsworth's poetry helps to confirm that the weakening of decorum, which seemed to leave the poet imprisoned by his own individuality (a state which aroused in both Clare and Wordsworth nostalgia for childhood), was not the work of any one poet but was inherent in the poetic tradition as it reached Clare. This weakening found expression in the manner in which it was now conceded, as it had not been in response to Burns, that Clare's social origins enabled him, as Taylor put it in the introduction to the first volume of poems, to 'attempt to describe perfectly something which [was] never seen or heard expressed before'.²¹ Nevertheless, although readers now defined the social consensus of decorum less strictly, they were still unwilling to regard novel description of an unfamiliar social environment as sufficient in itself. The following passage is a typical specimen of praise in which full assent to Clare's 'minuteness of detail' is withheld -

Clare is strictly a descriptive poet; and his daily occupation in the fields has given him a manifest advantage over those minstrels whose pastoral strains are inspired by the contemplation of the furze and stunted herbage of Hampstead Heath, or the sooty verdure of a London square... He revels in an unbounded luxuriance of epithets; in his minuteness of detail he seems at a loss where to stop...²²

19. Letter to Sherwill, 12 July, 1820, quoted in Robert Protherough, 'A study of John Clare's poetry', unpublished B.Litt.thesis, University of Oxford, 1955, p. 318.

20. *The Prose of John Clare*, edited by J.W. and Anne Tibble (London, 1951), p. 118.

21. Storey, *Clare: The Critical Heritage*, p. 47.

22. Unsigned review, *New Monthly Magazine*, 13 (March, 1820), 326-330; *ibid.*, p. 68.

Readers felt that Clare's propensity for description was antipathetic to the unifying sympathy of feeling, the foundation of consensus in this period, and so he was continually being advised that his poems 'abound too much in mere description & are deficient in Sentiment and Feeling and human Interest'.²³ The one talent which enabled Clare to transcend his social inferiority also disqualified his poetry from complete acceptance. Clare was left with the invidious task of asserting his individuality in such a way as to provide the expected generalization. The result was generally, as we have seen, unresolved contradiction. In a late poem, 'Pleasant Places', published in 1835, the requisite generalization appears in the guise of personified 'wonder', elaborated with mannerisms probably chosen according to Clare's idea of his average gentleman-reader. The personification is an implicit assertion that Clare's catalogue of places would attract universal approval and yet two lines later Clare ascribes his list to an individual taste -

Heaths overspread with furze-bloom's sunny shine,
Where wonder pauses to exclaim, 'Divine!'
Old ponds, dim shadowed with a broken tree:
These are the picturesque of taste to me...

(7-10)

Whereas Wordsworth tried to transmute his memory into representative poetry by means of his own creative power, Clare, a more reticent poet, retained of Wordsworth's union of memory and imagination memory only -

There is nothing but poetry about the existence of childhood real
simple soul-moving poetry laughter and joy of poetry & not its
philosophy & there is nothing of poetry about manhood but the
reflection & remembrance of what has been²⁴

The poetry of manhood, with its 'philosophy', that is, its decorum (we recall Taylor's use of the word 'philosopher' to mean 'the man of common sense'), is, for Clare, merely a reminder of the self-consciousness which disrupted the immediacy of his childhood relationship with his surroundings and brought with it no compensating relationships in which he could believe. The poetry of manhood is the equivalent of knowledge and an apparently irredeemable Fall -

23. Letter from James Hessey to John Clare, 3 November, 1824; *ibid.*, pp. 194-195.

24. J.W. and Anne Tibble, *The Prose of John Clare*, pp. 44-45.

Ah what a paradise begins with life & what a wilderness the knowledge of the world discloses Surely the Garden of Eden was nothing more than our first parents entrance upon life & the loss of it their knowledge of the world²⁵

Clare's poetry is, like Wordsworth's, a poor record of passion - 'Oh, words are poor receipts for what time hath stole away' ('Remembrances', 29) - but Wordsworth's striving for continuity and universality has only a perfunctory equivalent in Clare's poetry. Clare's real preoccupation is with 'fond Memory's pleasing pains' ('Helpstone', 131), a compulsive recital of past and individual joys suspected of being illusory but sought as the only alternative to nullity.

At the beginning of this essay I suggested that Pope found the ultimate value and purpose for life in striving and I have concluded by emphasizing the same argument in Wordsworth's poetry as that which preserved Wordsworth from Clare's eventual isolation and consequently his poetry from Clare's corrosive doubts. Order, both Pope and Wordsworth seem to imply, is perhaps an arbitrary and transient resolution of the striving which is the only permanent value of human existence, its distinguishing characteristic, and yet order is the necessary goal which makes striving possible. It seems, therefore, that I have sought to reveal the contingencies of decorum, a concept of literary and social ordering, only to discover a more fundamental order uniting the apparent extremes of Pope and Wordsworth and so providing a means of placing the other poets discussed. But this is a discovery which seems to belie the suspicion of the arbitrariness of order which forms its basis.

Perhaps my discovery of order in variety is merely another manifestation of the disjunction, with which I have also been concerned, between those poets who seek stasis but find only process and those readers who both seek and find only stasis. Perhaps the fact of this difference owes as much to prevailing ideas of decorum distinguishing poetry and criticism as its nuances do to the changing configurations of the urban middle class; imagination has always been more strictly subordinated to imitation in criticism than in poetry, though this attempted ordering is also now receiving the sceptical attention of some critics. It would be interesting to trace the development of decorum with

25. Ibid., pp. 17-18.

respect to criticism from the relative tolerance of the early eighteenth century, which produced Addison's liberal endowment of imagination to 'all writings in general' (though to poetry in particular)²⁶ and allowed *An Essay on Criticism* to be presented as poetry, to the severity of Johnson's repudiation of any light in criticism but 'the light of reason',²⁷ a repudiation which gained general acceptance. However, I have been more concerned in this essay with the relationship between poetry and criticism as it was affected by changing ideas of poetic decorum and to this end I have constructed two contrasting orders within the period 1770 to 1812: the middle-class reader, determined to defend a temporary resolution of unstable elements in the belief that nothing more stable can be found, and the poet concerned with the rural poor, worrying at such resolutions because of what they exclude.

Of course, my way of putting it here fails to do justice to the mixed intentions and practice of both poets and readers, for it is the fate of order always to exclude as well as to contain. Crabbe and Cowper, for instance, like Pope, would have hesitated to accept the company that I

26. See *The Spectator*, no. 421 (3 July, 1721) -

The pleasures of the imagination are not wholly confined to such particular authors as are conversant in material objects but are often to be met with among the polite masters of morality, criticism, and other speculations abstracted from matter, who, though they do not directly treat of the visible parts of nature, often draw from them their similitudes, metaphors, and allegories... It is this talent of affecting the imagination that gives an embellishment to good sense and makes one man's compositions more agreeable than another's. It sets off all writings in general, but is the very life and highest perfection of poetry... It has something in it like creation; it bestows a kind of existence and draws up to the reader's view several objects which are not to be found in being.

(Elledge, I, pp. 74-75)

Compare Coleridge's belief that 'the true critic sees "with the eye of the imagination"' (quoted in Prickett, p. 118).

27. See *The Rambler*, no. 93 (5 February, 1751) -

[T]he duty of criticism is neither to depreciate nor dignify by partial representations, but to hold out the light of reason, whatever it may discover, and to promulgate the determination of truth, whatever she shall dictate.

(Elledge, II, p. 604)

have made them keep. But I should like to think that they might have recognized something in my ordering of them that was true to their remarkably diverse and divided poetry and to the remarkably uniform attention which it received. However, I must leave it to someone who is more poet than reader to begin the dismantling of this order.

Appendix A: Imitations of *The Deserted Village*, 1771-1835

I have described a poem as an imitation if it is explicitly based on the original or if it reproduces the theme of an ideal village adversely affected by an external event or process in a manner derived from the original.

John Robinson, *The Village Oppress'd* (London, 1771).

Anthony King, *The Frequented Village* (London, [1771]).

Conway, *The Depopulated Vale* (London, 1774).

'The Emigrant, and Eclogue, Occasioned by the Late Numerous Emigrations from the Highlands of Scotland', *Weekly Magazine*, 30 (1776), 399-400.
The Deserted City (London, 1780).

Thomas Combe, *The Peasant of Auburn; or, The Emigrant* (London, 1783)

'The Country Clergyman', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 56, 2 (November, 1786), 983.

Hannah Cowley, *The Scottish Village; or, Pitcairne Green* (London, 1786)

Thomas Clio Rickman, *The Fallen Cottage* [London, 1786?]

The Deserted Village [Birmingham, c.1790] (A broadside with woodcuts printed and sold by T. Bloomer, 53 Edgbaston Street, Birmingham; the poem is in ballad metre and is sufficiently different from the original to be described as an imitation. A copy is in the British Library)

Thomas Holcroft, 'Elegy occasioned by the present frequent and pernicious custom of monopolizing Farms', *Monthly Magazine*, 2, 11 (December, 1796), 890-891.

Mary Robinson, 'The Deserted Cottage', in *Lyrical Tales* (London, 1800), pp. 123-128 (The poem was printed under the title 'The Deserted Village' in the *Scots Magazine*, 62 (March, 1800), 192-193)

William Golden, *The Distress'd Village* (Chelmsford, 1800)

S.J. Pratt, *The Poor; or, Bread* (London, 1801) (The third edition was published in 1803 under the title *Cottage-Pictures; or, The Poor*)

ΜΟΞΚΟΛ, 'The Deserted Cottage', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 72, 1 (March, 1802), 253-254

William Holloway, *The Peasant's Fate* (London, 1802)

Richard Wallis, *The Happy Village* (South Shields, 1802)

Edward Mangin, *The Deserted City* (London, 1805)

Thomas Dermody, 'The Frequented Village', in *The Harp of Erin*, 2 vols (London, 1807), I, pp. 123-132.

William Holloway, 'The Desolate Village', in *The Minor Minstrel* (London, 1808), pp. 85-89

Charles Ash, *Adbaston; or, Days of Youth* (London, 1814)

Arthur Parsey, *The Deserted Village Restored* (London, 1815)

John Wilson, 'The Desolate Village', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 1 (April, 1817), 70-71 (An expanded version of the poem, in three sections, is in *The Works of Professor Wilson*, edited by Professor Ferrier, 12 vols (Edinburgh and London, 1855-1858), XII (1858), pp. 358-371)

J.P., 'The Rector', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, 6 (November, 1819), 197
The Peasant of Auburn; or, The Old Man's Tale (London, 1819)

John Clare, 'Helpstone', in *Poems Descriptive of Rural Life and Scenery* (London, 1820), pp. 3-11

Oliver Goldsmith, Jnr, *The Rising Village* (London, 1825)

Allen Davenport, 'Rural Reflections', in *The Muse's Wreath* (London, [1830?], pp. 49-54

Ebenezer Elliott, *The Splendid Village* (London, 1833)

'A Small Farmer's Dream', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 2 n.s. (July, 1835), 429-430

Appendix B

It was not Goldsmith's assertion of depopulation that was implausible but his identification of its cause as the demolition of villages for the purpose of landscaping an estate. Certainly there were many instances of such demolition in the eighteenth century (see A.J. Sambrook, 'The English Lord and the Happy Husbandman', *Studies on Voltaire and the Eighteenth Century*, edited by Theodore Besterman, vol. 57 (Geneva, 1967), 1357-1375, pp. 1362-1363; A.J. Sambrook, 'An Essay on Eighteenth-century Pastoral, Pope to Wordsworth' (II)). However, depopulation was more usually attributed to such causes as the engrossing of farms (Thomas Wright, *A Short Address to the Public on the Monopoly of Small Farms* (London, 1795); one F. Mortimer published a song to this effect entitled *Little Farms* to be sung to the tune of 'God Save the King'; on the demolition of cottages for the purposes of engrossing, see Robert W. Malcolmson, *Life and Labour in England 1700-1780* (London, 1981), pp. 139-140) or the increase in the national debt (Richard Price, *Essay on the Present State of Population in England and Wales* (London, 1779) or the Corn Laws (William Roberts, 'The Poor Man's Prayer', first published in 1766). Wordsworth reveals the influence of this last tradition when he refers vaguely to 'that monopolising system of legislation whose baleful influence is shewn in the depopulation of the country and in the necessity which reduces the sad relicks to owe their very existence to the ostentatious bounty of their oppressors' (*A Letter to the Bishop of Llandaff*, Owen and Smyser, I, p. 43).

Other distinguished between different kinds of engrossing, arguing that depopulation occurred only when arable land was converted into pasture (John Arbuthnot, *An Inquiry into the Connection between the present Price of Provisions, and the Size of Farms* (London, 1773); Thomas Batchelor, *The Progress of Agriculture*).

Others, such as John Howlett, argued that enclosure actually increased population (*An Enquiry into the Influence which Enclosures have had upon the Population of England* (1786)). Modern historians tend to agree that the rural population expanded during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries because of an increase in life expectancy (see, for example, Thomas McKeown and R.G. Brown, 'Medical Evidence Related to English Population Changes in the Eighteenth Century', *Population Studies*, 9 (1955), 119-141). Gordon Philpot has argued that enclosure reduced the incidence of diseases contracted from animals infected because of overcrowding and consequent lack of food on the commons and hence encouraged population growth ('Enclosure and Population Growth in Eighteenth-century England', *Explorations in Economic History*, 12, 1 (1975), 29-46; see also Michael Turner, 'Parliamentary Enclosure and Population Change in England, 1750-1830', *Explorations in Economic History*, 13, 4 (1976), 463-468; Gordon Philpot, 'Reply to "Parliamentary Enclosure and Population Change in England, 1750-1830"', *Explorations in Economic History*, 13, 4 (1976), 469-471). Many historians have followed J.D. Chambers ('Enclosure and Labour Supply in the Industrial Revolution', *Economic History Review*, 2nd ser., 5, 3 (1953), 319-343) in arguing that 'the increased demand for farm labour in newly enclosed and reclaimed land alike more than compensated for local losses due to the extinction of small farms and removal of landless labourers' (R. Lawton, 'Rural Depopulation in Nineteenth Century England', in *English Rural Communities*, edited by D. Mills (London,

1973), pp. 195-219, p. 196). Recruits to the industrial labour force came from an unabsorbed surplus and not from the main body of the population (see J.D. Chambers and G.E. Mingay, *The Agricultural Revolution 1750-1880* (London, 1966), pp. 102-104; E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, revised edition (Harmondsworth, 1968), p. 247). N.F.R. Crafts, however, has recently suggested that the increase in agricultural employment over the first half of the nineteenth century was owing not to enclosure but to a decrease in the labour to output ratio and that there is evidence of some connection between enclosure and migration to towns ('Enclosure and Labor Supply Revisited', *Explorations in Economic History*, 15, 2 (1978), 172-183).

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